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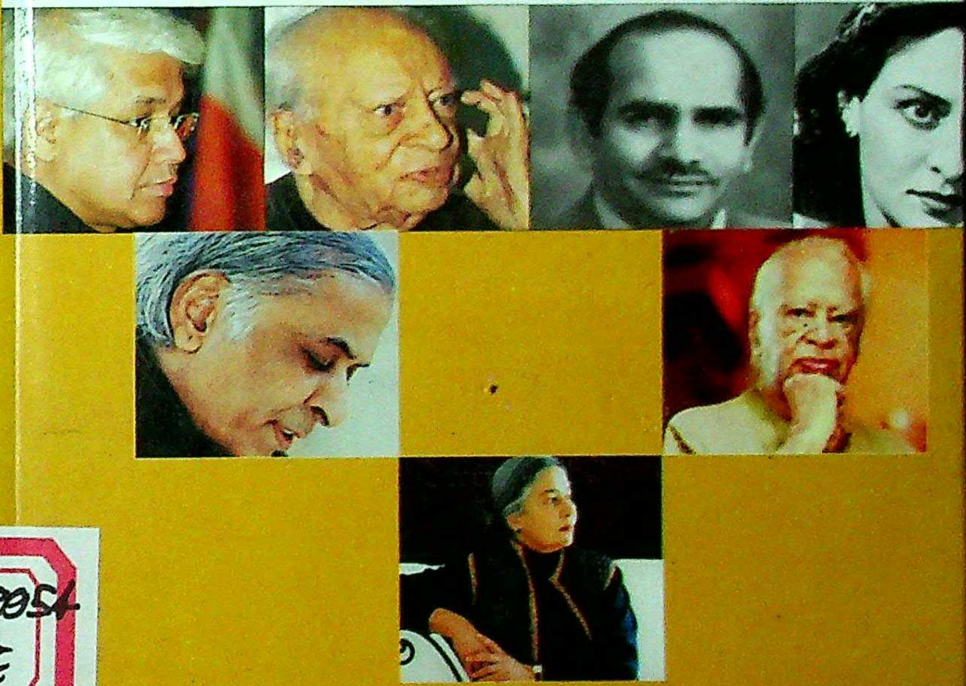

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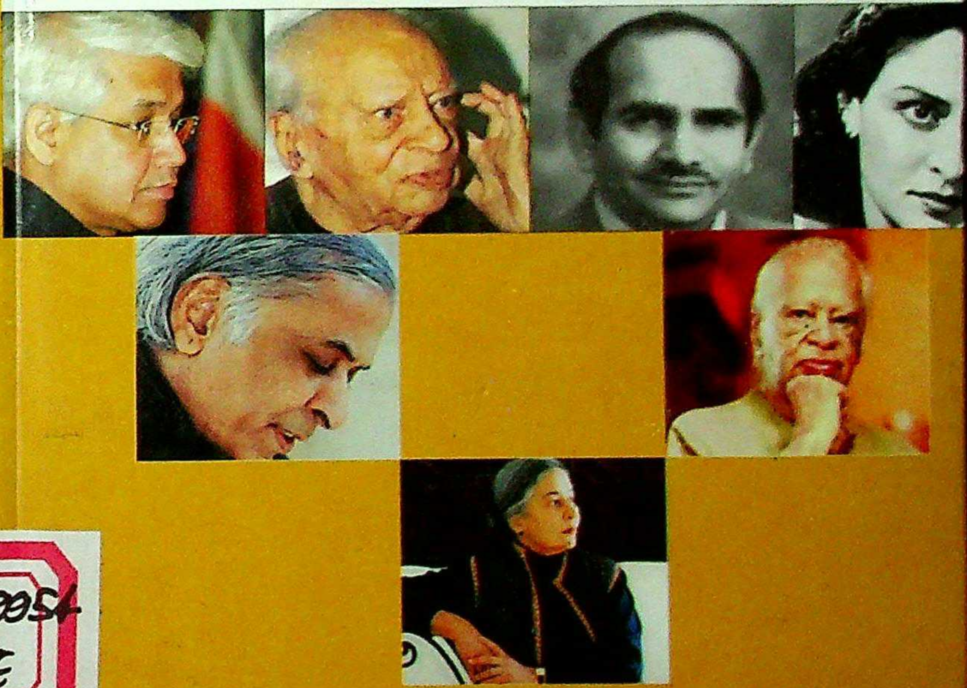

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Encyclopaedia of Indian English Criticism is prepared keeping in view of the Indian students undergoing P.G. and U.G. in different Indian Universities. All authors and their works are selected strictly following the latest syllabus. Critical discussions are examination oriented. This encyclopaedia is a huge source of reference for scholars and teachers. The major works of selected authors are critically analysed taking help of different expert critics and research scholars working on those particular authors.

Encyclopaedia are:

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ENCYCLOPAEDIA
OF
INDIAN ENGLISH CRITICISM

(AMITAV GHOSH: A CRITICAL STUDY)

Vol. 6

पुस्तकालय
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Editor

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PREFACE

Indian English literature is an endeavour of showcasing the rare gems of Indian writing in English. From being a curious native explosion, Indian English has become a new form of Indian culture and voice in which India speaks. While Indian authors, poets, novelists, essayists, dramatists have been making significant contributions to world literature since the pre-Independence era, the past few years have seen a massive flourishing of Indian English writing in the international market. Not only are the works of Indian authors writing in English soaring on the best-seller list, they are also receiving a great deal of critical acclaim. Starting from Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Anita Desai, Toru Dutt to Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Allan Sealy, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Arundhati Roy, Vikram Chandra ... the parade of fine Indian writers is long and lengthening.

Present-day India boasts an English-language literature of energy and diversity and has spawned a striking literary diaspora. Some writers of Indian descent (V. S. Naipaul , Bharati Mukherjee) now reject the ethnic label of 'Indian writers'. Mukherjee sees herself as American, while Naipaul would perhaps prefer to be read as an artist from nowhere and everywhere. For some Indian critics, English-language Indian writing is a post-colonial anomaly; its continuing use of the old colonial tongue is seen as a fatal flaw and renders it inauthentic. However, others have argued that English became a naturalized subcontinental language long ago. And it is part of the achievement of English-language Indian writers to have found literary voices as distinctively Indian, but also suitable for all purposes of art, as those other languages forged in Ireland, Africa, the West Indies, and the United States.

Encyclopaedia of Indian English Criticism is prepared keeping in view of the Indian students undergoing P.G. and U.G. in different Indian Universities. All authors and their works are selected strictly following the latest syllabus. Critical discussions are examination oriented. This encyclopaedia is a huge source of reference for scholars and teachers. The major works of selected authors are critically analysed taking help of different expert critics and research scholars working on those particular authors.

Editors

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1

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh born July 11, 1956, is an Indian-Bengali author known for his work in the English language. He was born in Kolkata and was educated at The Doon School; St. Stephen's College, Delhi; Delhi University; Alexandria; and St. Edmund Hall, Oxford, where he was awarded a D. Phil. in social anthropology. His first job was at the Indian Express newspaper in New Delhi.

Ghosh lives in New York with his wife, Deborah Baker, author of the Laura Riding biography *In Extremis: The Life of Laura Riding* (1993) and a senior editor at Little, Brown and Company. They have two children, Lila and Nayan. He has been a Fellow at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta. In 1999, Ghosh joined the faculty at Queens College, City University of New York as Distinguished Professor in Comparative Literature. He has also been a visiting professor to the English department of Harvard University since 2005. Ghosh has recently purchased a property in Goa and is returning to India. He is working on a trilogy to be published by Penguin Books India. In 2009 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

Ghosh's latest work of fiction is *Sea of Poppies* (2008) an epic saga, set just before the Opium Wars which encapsulates the colonial history of the East. His other novels are *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), *The Glass Palace* (2000) and *The Hungry Tide* (2004). The *Shadow Lines* won the Sahitya Akademi Award, India's most prestigious literary award. The *Calcutta Chromosome* won the

Arthur C. Clarke Award for 1997. *Sea of Poppies* was shortlisted for the 2008 Booker Prize. Ghosh's fiction is characterised by strong themes that may be somewhat identified with postcolonialism but could be labelled as historical novels. His topics are unique and personal; some of his appeal lies in his ability to weave "Indo-nostalgic" elements into more serious themes. Ghosh has also written *In an Antique Land* (1992), *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma* (1998), *Countdown* (1999), and *The Imam and the Indian* (2002, a large collection of essays on different themes such as fundamentalism, history of the novel, Egyptian culture, and literature). In 2007, he was awarded the Padma Shri by the Indian government.

NOVELS

The Shadow Lines

The Shadow Lines (1988) is a Sahitya Akademi Award-winning novel by Indian-Bengali writer Amitav Ghosh. It is a book that captures perspective of time and events, of lines that bring people together and hold them apart, lines that are clearly visible on one perspective and nonexistent on another. Lines that exist in the memory of one, and therefore in another's imagination. A narrative built out of an intricate, constantly crisscrossing web of memories of many people, it never pretends to tell a story. Rather it invites the reader to invent one, out of the memories of those involved, memories that hold mirrors of differing shades to the same experience. The novel is set against the backdrop of historical events like Swadeshi movement, Second World War, Partition of India and Communal riots of 1963-64 in Dhaka and Calcutta. The novel brought its author the 1989 Sahitya Akademi Award for English, by the Sahitya Akademi, India's National Academy of Letters.

Plot Summary

The novel follows the life of a young boy growing up in Calcutta and later on in Delhi and London. His family – the

Datta Chaudharis - and the Prices in London are linked by the friendship between their respective patriarchs – Justice Dattachaudhari and Alan Tresawsen. The narrator adores Tridib because of his tremendous knowledge and his perspective of the incidents and places. Tha'mma thinks that Tridib is type of person who seems 'determined to waste his life in idle self-indulgence', one who refuses to use his family connections to establish a career. Unlike his grandmother, the narrator loves listening to Tridib. For the narrator, Tridib's lore is very different from the collection of facts and figures. The narrator is sexually attracted to Ila but his feelings are passive. He never expresses his feelings to her afraid to lose the relationship that exists between them. However one day he involuntarily shows his feelings when she was changing clothes in front of him being unaware of his feelings. She feels sorry for him. Tha'mma does not like Ila. 'Why do you always speak for that whore' - She doesn't like her grandson to support her. Tha'mma has a dreadful past and wants to reunite her family and goes to Dhaka to bring back her uncle. Tridib is in love with May and sacrificed his life to rescue her from mobs in the communal riots of 1963-64 in Dhaka.

Characters

- Narrator – The protagonist is a middle class boy who grows up in a middle class family.
- Tridib – He was the son of Mayadebi, and so by relation he was the second uncle of Narrator.
- Grandmother of Narrator (Tha'mma) – She is the headmistress of girls school in Calcutta. She is very strict, disciplined, hardworking, mentally strong and patient lady.
- Ila – She is the cousin of narrator. She lives in Stockwell, London. She is very good looking.
- May – She is the daughter of Prices family.
- Nick – He is a good looking blonde having long hair and wants to become a Chartered Accountant. In the course of the novel he marries Ila.

THE CALCUTTA CHROMOSOME

The Calcutta Chromosome is a 1995 English Language novel by Indian author Amitav Ghosh. The book, for the most part set in Calcutta at some unspecified time in the future, is a medical thriller that dramatizes the adventures of apparently disconnected people who are brought together by a mysterious turn of events. The book is loosely based on the life and times of Sir Ronald Ross, the Nobel Prize winning scientist who achieved a breakthrough in malaria research in 1898. The novel was the recipient of the Arthur C. Clarke Award in 1997.

Plot Summary

The novel begins with the story of Antar, an employee of the Life Watch organization, who recounts an encounter with L. Murugan, an employee of LifeWatch who has disappeared in Calcutta. The plot is quite complicated and its timelines are deliberately mixed up. Antar starts to track Murugan's disappearance in Calcutta many years back. Murugan has asked to be transferred to Calcutta because of his fascination with the life of Sir Ronald Ross. The Calcutta of Ronald Ross is well separated in time from the Calcutta that Murugan visits, but the New York of Antar and the Calcutta of Murugan seem to overlap in time, though it is clearly stated in the novel that they are separated by many years. Through his research into old and lost documents and phone messages, Antar figures out that Murugan had systematically unearthed an underground scientific/mystical movement that could grant eternal life.

Loosely described, the process is as follows: the disciples of this movement can transfer their chromosomes into another, and gradually become that person or take over that person. In the novel, Ronald Ross did not discover the mysteries of the malaria parasite; it was a group of underground practitioners of a different, mystical "science," natives of India, who helped to guide Ross to the conclusions for which he is famous. These Indians provided Ross with clues in the belief that in the moment Ross made his discovery, the parasite would change its nature. At this point, a new variant of malaria would emerge and the group's research using the chromosome-transfer technique would advance even further.

Fact and Fiction in *The Calcutta Chromosome*

Ghosh employs a factual framework for the invented events in the novel, drawing upon Ross' *Memoirs* which were published in 1923. Thus, many of the characters in the novel are historical persons drawn from excerpts of letters and other documents incorporated by Ross into this autobiographical work. The novel, however, reflects a post-colonial understanding of the scientific mechanism at work. The *Memoirs* were designed to buttress Ross' claim of sole credit for the discovery that malaria is carried by the anopheles mosquito. While the fantastical circumstances Murugan uncovers in the novel are not factual, the underlying evaluation of the circumstances of medical exploration in colonial times seems to be factually based. Chambers explains that it was "common currency" among Bengali intellectuals that Ross exploited native workers in his quest to find the cause of malaria.

Themes

Silence is a recurrent theme in the novel, originating from the often-stated premise that to say something is to change it. Huttunen notes that the workings of the Indian scientific/mystical movement uncovered by Murugan "constitutes a counter-science to Western scientific discourse". The tenets of the group contain aspects of the Hindu belief in the transmigration of souls as well as of contemporary scientific ideas about genetics and cloning. Its native Indian members operate through means kept secret from the more Westernized characters and from the reader, and their activities become progressively clearer as the novel continues until their plan is revealed to the reader. Huttunen explains that the methodology of this group is based on the ideas of Emmanuel Levinas about communication by way of silence. In Levinas' view, "the other exists outside the traditional ontology of Western philosophy which conceives of all being as objects that can be internalized by consciousness or grasped by adequate representation ... Consequently silence in this novel represents the kind of unattainable experience that transcends the level of language, or knowing". It is this enigma that the novel leaves behind as an abiding theme. The reader is forced to keep thinking about it much after turning the last page.

The mystery at the heart of the story is never completely resolved by the author, leaving much to the reader's understanding and interpretation.

Characters

- **Antar** - A man in the future who is about to retire. He is tracking Murugan.
- **Murugan** - He calls himself Morgan. He lives in the nineties and is an authority on Sir Ronald Ross. Much of the novel is about his tracking the life of Ronald Ross.
- **Ronald Ross** - the Nobel prize winning scientist who found out that malaria is spread through mosquitoes. Much of his research is spoken about. He conducted his experiments on a man called 'Lutchman.' His tale is narrated by Murugan.
- **Lutchman** - He once lived at Renupur station. His family and whole village had been wiped out by a strange epidemic. He was later picked up by Ross for his experiments and did everything for him. He claimed he was a 'dhooley bearer' or a cleaner. Later in the novel it is revealed that his name was actually 'Laakhan' and he changed his name at every village to sound like a local.
- **Mangala** - Cleaning woman at Doctor Cunningham's Laboratory, but that's her disguise, she is in reality a

Demi God who not only discovered the means of treating syphilis with the Malaria parasite but also found a form of asexual reproduction/reincarnation for humans which kept her and Lutchman alive forever.

- **Sonali** - A writer, a journalist, and actor who, it is suggested in the novel, transforms herself with the help of Mangala's "science"
- **Urmila** - A journalist for the same publication as Sonali, she is the one Mangala chooses for her transformation or reincarnation.
- **Romen Haldar** - Lutchman in his most recent reincarnation.

THE GLASS PALACE

The Glass Palace is a 2000 historical novel by Indian writer Amitav Ghosh. The novel sets in Burma, India, and Malay, spans a century from the fall of the Konbaung Dynasty in Mandalay, through the Second World War to modern times. Focusing mainly on the early 20th Century, it explores a broad range of issues, ranging from the changing economic landscape of Burma and India, to pertinent questions about what constitutes a nation and how these change as society is swept along by the tide of modernity.

The name of the novel derives from the *Glass Palace Chronicle*, which is an old Burmese historical work commissioned by King Bagyidaw in 1829.

Summary

Part One - Mandalay

The novel starts with a teenage boy called Rajkumar running through the city of Mandalay to find a woman called Ma Cho. He is the last surviving member of his family and comes from Burma from India with a bright entrepreneurial spirit and a hunger for success. Rajkumar's work as an assistant on Ma Cho's food stall takes place in the shadow of the Glass Palace, in which King Thibaw and his wife reside with their daughters, the princesses.

As the British invasion comes to topple the incumbent regime, everyday citizens of Mandalay are able to enter the enshrined building, and it is then that Rajkumar spots Dolly, one of the princesses' assistants, and instantly falling in love with her. However, the entire Royal Family and their entourage are quickly extradited by the British and forced into house arrest thousands of miles away on the West coast of India.

Part Two – Ratnagiri

Whilst Rajkumar's quickly evolving career begins to take shape with the help of Saya John, a successful teak merchant (Ma Cho's sometime lover), we are given a glimpse into the awkward beginnings of a new life for King Thebaw and his family as they try to settle into the port town of Ratnagiri, north of Goa. Events conspire to weave Outram House (the name of the residence the British provide to house the family and what remains of their assistants) more firmly into the life of Ratnagiri than had been expected. King Thebaw is revered by the local community, and in time the family come to feel secure and even happy in their new surroundings.

The arrival of a new Collector stirs up feelings of resentment towards the colonial regime, but Uma, the Collector's headstrong wife, is able to help bridge the gap by befriending Dolly.

Meanwhile, Rajkumar has been enduring the hardships of the teak trade, having witnessed man and beast working together on an epic scale as elephants transport large volumes of wood down from the forests for sale into the British Empire's vastly expanding markets.

Being the opportunist that he is, Rajkumar starts to make his own way in world after receiving advice from his new friend and colleague Doh Say. Borrowing cash from Saya John, he makes the journey to India to recruit povertystricken village-dwellers into the comparatively lucrative (yet undoubtedly perilous) world of early oil-mining in Burma. Having made enough money this way, Rajkumar does what has been his dream for some time: buy a timber-yard of his own, with Doh Say as business partner.

Having built a more than modest commercial empire, Rajkumar had one piece of unfinished business: to track down the only girl he'd ever loved, Dolly. Through an Indian connection in Rangoon (Yangon), Rajkumar makes contact with Ratnagiri via Uma, and is accordingly granted an audience with the Collector and his wife over a meal that of course stiffly conforms to colonial best practice. To his surprise, Dolly is present, and after some drama, he finally persuades her to leave the family she has been exiled with, and return with him to Burma as his wife.

Part Three - The Money Tree

Saya John prides himself on being able to spot the next big commodity, and on their return to Rangoon, he hands Rajkumar and Dolly a small clump of odd elastic material: rubber.

Part Four - The Wedding

A joining of multi-ethnic families in Calcutta.

Part Five - Morningside

Life before World War II on a rubber plantation in Malaya.

Part Six - The Front

The story of the Japanese invasion of Malaya and Burma and the subsequent family losses of lives and properties.

Part Seven - The Glass Palace

Post WWII lives of the scattered families.

Characters

Burmese Royal Family

- Thibaw Min (the last king of the Konbaung kingdom of Burma who were exiled to Ratnagiri, India) - Dies in exile of a heart attack
  - Supayalat (the last queen of Burma)
  - Hteiksu Myatpayagyi
  - Hteiksu Myatpayalat
  - Hteiksu Myatpaya
  - Hteiksu Myatpayalay

Rajkumar's Family

- Rajkumar Raha (the central character)
- Dolly Sein (Lady-in-waiting to Queen Supayalat and marries to Rajkumar)
- Neel Raha (Rajkumar and Dolly's elder son) - Neel dies trying to take his father's place in the family business. Bombs scare the elephants and he is crushed by falling timber
- Dinu Raha (Rajkumar and Dolly's younger son)
- Ilongo (illegitimate child of Rajkumar)
- Jaya (Neel and Manju's daughter)

Saya John's Family

- Saya John - Dies when bayoneted by a Japanese soldier
- Matthew (Saya John's son) - Dies in an accident
- Elsa Hoffman (Matthew's wife) - Dies in the accident which kills Matthew
- Alison (Matthew and Elsa's Daughter) - Dies in a battle of sorts, she kills 4 soldiers and then shoots herself
- Timmy (son of Matthew and Elsa who moves to America)

Uma Dey's Family

- Beni Prasad Dey (District Collector at Ratnagiri and marries to Uma)- Dies trying to take a boat out to sea
- Uma Dey (Madame Collector and Dolly's best friend)
- Manju (Uma's niece and marries to Neel) - Commits suicide after Neel dies by falling off a raft
- Arjun (Uma's nephew) - Dies in battle with his batman Kishan Singh
- Bela (Uma's youngest niece)

The Glass Palace begins in Burma, literally in its last days of independence before the British finally completely subjugated it in 1885. Ghosh starts off nicely, contrasting the story of a young orphaned Indian boy, Rajkumar, with that of the imperious but doomed Burmese royal family.

Rajkumar's family comes from Akyab, "the principal port of the Arakan — that tidewater stretch of coast where Burma and Bengal collide in a whirlpool of unease." All his family died of a fever that passed through the town, including the last survivor, his mother, who had tried to ship back to the ancestral home of Chittagong with Rajkumar. After his mother died the boy stayed to work on the boat, having no where else to go. In Mandalay, the Burmese royal capital, the boat needed extensive repairs, and during the wait Rajkumar went to work and live at a small food stall in town. He is there when the British invade and overthrow the monarchy.

Ghosh describes the court of Queen Supayalat and King Thebaw, focussing especially on one of the attendants, a young girl named Dolly who is the only one who can handle one of the infant princesses. Ghosh's account of the British invasion — calm, forceful, overwhelming — and the brief chaos in the great palace afterwards is very good. For much of the novel he then also follows the story of the royal family in their sad Indian exile.

The novel also follows the change in Burma, as the British exploit their colony and the teak industry comes to dominate the nation. Rajkumar remains in Burma, taken under the wing of Saya John — another orphan, from Malacca, who looks Chinese but is a sort of everyman, comfortable in the entire South-East Asian area. They work in the lumber industry, accumulating some wealth, gaining greater independence.

One of the most successful aspects of the book is that Ghosh has outsiders and foreigners — Indians in Burma, for example — taking advantage of the situation the British have created. The Indians themselves are victims of colonialism, but they also use it. Rajkumar and others are compromised, owing much of their success to the British, while the Burmese are presented entirely as victims. (Note that Ghosh himself was born to Burmese parents, in Calcutta. From the too-noble royal family up (or downwards) he barely presents a Burmese who isn't near-flawless, at least until he gets to U Ne Win.) Complicity with Empire also crops up in a different guise later specifically regarding Indians serving in the British armed forces.

The first chunk of this large book has a number of strands, but Ghosh manages to hold the reader's interest easily with the exotic locales and swift changes forced on them and the characters. He does, however, get bogged down at times. History is part of the problem: Ghosh feels compelled to explain the events not just from the characters' point of view but also to provide a gloss for readers who are unlikely to know the details. He tries a variety of approaches in providing this information, but they rarely fit smoothly in the rest of the story. This continues to be a problem throughout the novel, growing worse towards the end.

Ghosh also feels compelled to explain details about logging and elephant-handling and the motor-cars of the day and much else. The information is interesting, but rarely does he integrate it smoothly in his narrative. Certain details — a page on anthrax, for example — read as though they had been cut out of an encyclopedia and pasted in the text: "The word anthrax comes from the same root as anthracite, a variety of coal." etc.

History speeds up. Rajkumar grows up and, with Saya John's help, becomes a successful businessman as well. Eventually he will go seek out the girl he saw only briefly in Mandalay years before, the young attendant Dolly.

Rajkumar is happy in Burma, but times move on. The next big thing is rubber, and many of the multiplying characters head to Malaya to make another fortune.

World War II rolls around and brings turmoil. The Japanese invasion of Malaya means everyone must flee — or at least try to. The novel then careens to its end in modern Myanmar (Burma).

The family saga — centered mainly around Rajkumar and Saya John and their families and circle — is much like the usual big family novel. All the types are present. In the later generations there is the sensitive photographer Dinu and the soldier Arjun (and Alison, the woman they are both attracted to). There is Uma, greeted by huge crowds wherever she appears. And many more.

There is a great deal of good material here and fine local colour and exciting times. Surprisingly, then, it is also a plodding novel, advancing in fits and spurts, with Ghosh uncertain of where and what and who to focus on. The stories he ties together are occasionally too disparate, the links seeming too forced.

In large part this seems to be because Ghosh seems uncertain of what he wanted the novel to be. Because, beyond presenting a family saga of turbulent times, Ghosh also wrote a commentary on the colonial experience and its legacy. One might have expected any such theme to be neatly woven into the story itself, but in Ghosh's novel it largely stands out, too separate and distinct. His efforts in this direction, though occasionally successful in their own right, don't work particularly well in this setting. The novel tries to be too many things, without being any of those exceptionally well.

It is unfortunate: Ghosh's political strand is an interesting one. He brings a welcome focus on Indians in the military service, doing the British Empire's dirty work. Two-thirds of the soldiers that routed the Burmese in 1885 were Indian sepoys, he reminds readers early on. The role of Indians in the British armed forces remains a significant one throughout the novel. As cries for Indian independence grow louder the role of Indians in the armed forces becomes more controversial. Here it culminates with Arjun and his fellow-soldiers and the issues they face in World War II. It is worthy stuff, and Ghosh presents much of this well, painting the issue not merely black and white but in its whole (and often very human) complexity.

Unfortunately, much of this sticks out like a sore thumb in the book. Ghosh often writes quite well, but the shifts from these issues to some sappy romance scenes to lumbering explanations of the businesses of the day to airy photography-talk make for a muddle. Often it feels like *The Glass Palace* is several novels, spliced up and edited into one. The continuing story of the Burmese royal family in exile and then back in Burma is quite fascinating and well-done: Ghosh gets the noble tragedy of it down well. But it also dangles at a loose end for much of the novel, too significant to just be background, but not sufficiently integrated into much of the story.

The history and politics are also a problem. Ghosh feels he needs to explain (as perhaps he does to a Western audience), but he does so neither well (the textbook-like interruptions bring the narrative to screeching halts) nor adequately. Only a few incidents are covered in sufficient depth. Important figures are thrown into the fray, briefly mentioned, and then disappear again. The historical complexity is reduced to stick-figure simplicity — problematic in a book ostensibly dealing with these issues. Ghosh does fine in the Malayan jungle, with isolated troops figuring out the meaning of all this: who they should be loyal to, what they are fighting for. But the true historical picture, the political issues and conflicts, remain largely incoherent.

The book's rushed end, dealing with Burma's recent history, is also less than satisfying. Ghosh clearly meant to comment also on the tragic current situation in Myanmar/ Burma, but he approaches it warily. The ostensible connexions to the rest of the book also seem forced.

The Glass Palace is an often interesting and engaging read. It is also frustrating and often disappointing.

Early on Ghosh describes the Burmese Queen in exile, suggesting one of the thoughts in her head as rare visitors see how far she has fallen:

We were the first to be imprisoned in the name of their progress; millions more will follow. This is what awaits us all: this is how we will all end — as prisoners, in shantytowns born of the plague. A hundred years hence you will read the indictment of Europe's greed in the difference between the Kingdom of Siam and the state of our own enslaved realm.

It is a telling passage. It makes clear Ghosh's stance: modern Myanmar — bad, modern Thailand — good. (It is again a gross simplification — but it is clearly a point Ghosh wishes to make: the passage would have been equally effective without any mention of Siam or prospective comparison.)

Far more significant is that Ghosh implies the horrors of colonialism truly only began at this time, in the 1880s, and that what happened before pales against the harmful imprisonment and the specific type of capitalist exploitation that followed. Some argument can be made for this: many outrages of Empire did occur in these times, from the carving up of Africa to the use of Indian sepoys to subjugate Indians themselves, and others, in the name of England to the economic, ecological, and moral devastation wreaked in much of the world. Still, it is a curious spin to put on colonialism.

Ultimately we would have preferred one or the other: the political novel, focussing on the consequences of Empire, or the family saga. As is, *The Glass Palace* is an uncomfortable mix of the two.

Ghosh's writing is remarkably uneven. There are a number of fine passages, but especially the factual ones — as he discusses everything from car-makes to KLM flights in the region to politics — stand out distractingly. (Rare exceptions include some of the passages on teak-logging.) There are also moments when his pen gets away from him completely. So, for example, a scene where Jaya is using the Internet:

> She rested her fingers on the keyboard and took a deep breath. Then she typed in the words "Ilongo Alagappan" and hit "enter".

The search engine quivered, like a hound that had sniffed a hot trail. For a long, nerve-racking minute, an icon winked on the monitor. Suddenly the screen quivered again and a message appeared.

"The search engine quivered"? What on earth is he talking about ? The search engine quivered "like a hound that had sniffed a hot trail" ? Sounds like something out of a bad TV commercial. And then it is the screen that is quivering — "again"? When was it quivering the first time? Such sloppy overwriting unfortunately crops up too frequently.

In his extensive Author's Note Ghosh mentions he read hundreds of books and travelled thousands of miles researching his novel. The surfeit of material and impressions seems to have done far more harm than good.

Ghosh also thanks numerous people, including four editors. And here we were, thinking there were no more editors out there in the publishing world! This begs the question, however, of what these editors were doing. Ghosh's sprawling, unevenly written book does not read like a finely-edited novel.

On the face of it it doesn't look edited at all (though admittedly we are not familiar with Ghosh's original draft, which might have looked far different from this version). The novel fits together badly — so perhaps different editors were responsible for different sections of it? Or perhaps it is merely proof that too many editors spoil the soup.

There are several worthwhile novels in *The Glass Palace,* struggling to break out. As is, it is a largely unexceptional read with some fine touches and interesting points. But if you want to read about Burma Maurice Collis still provides more entertainment (and local colour). And F. Tennyson Jesse's *The*

Lacquer Lady offers a fictionally more satisfying account of Queen Supayalat. Nearly a good novel, but not quite.

THE HUNGRY TIDE

The Hungry Tide (2005) is the sixth novel by Indian-born author, Amitav Ghosh. It won the 2004 Hutch Crossword Book Award for Fiction.

Synopsis

The Hungry Tide tells a very contemporary story of adventure and unlikely love, identity and history, set in one of the most fascinating regions on the earth. Off the easternmost coast of India, in the Bay of Bengal, lies the immense labyrinth of tiny islands known as the Sundarbans. For settlers here, life is extremely precarious. Attacks by deadly tigers are common. Unrest and eviction are constant threats. Without warning, at any time, tidal floods rise and surge over the land, leaving devastation in their wake. In this place of vengeful beauty, the lives of three people from different worlds collide. Piyali Roy is a young marine biologist, of Indian descent but stubbornly American, in search of a rare, endangered river dolphin, *Orcaella brevirostris*. Her journey begins with a disaster, when she is thrown from a boat into crocodile-infested waters.

Rescue comes in the form of a young, illiterate fisherman, Fokir. Although they have no language between them, Piya and Fokir are powerfully drawn to each other, sharing an uncanny instinct for the ways of the sea. Piya engages Fokir to help with her research and finds a translator in Kanai Dutt, a businessman from Delhi whose idealistic aunt and uncle are longtime settlers in the Sundarbans. As the three of them launch into the elaborate backwaters, they are drawn unawares into the hidden undercurrents of this isolated world, where political turmoil exacts a personal toll that is every bit as powerful as the ravaging tide. Already an international success, The Hungry Tide is a prophetic novel of remarkable insight, beauty, and humanity.

The Morichjhanpi massacre incident of 1978-79, when the newly elected CPI(M) government of West Bengal forcibly evicted thousands of Bengali refugees who had settled on the island, forms a background for some parts of the novel. The novel explores topics like humanism and environmentalism, especially when they come into a conflict of interest with each other.

Style

Amitav Ghosh is a writer of Postmodern fiction. His stories travel throughout time and space, creating an account that has an asymmetrical flow. In *The Hungry Tide,* he shuttles between the Morichjhanpi incident from Nirmal's point of view, and the present day travels of Piya Roy, Kanai and Fokir. This time-travel is vital to the story and created a intricate of sub-topics and plots. Another trait of Ghosh that is continued in *The Hungry Tide* is the scrupulous research that allows a mixture of fiction and fact to the extent that they stand undifferentiated. Touching upon various topics from refugees, freedom and war, to life in the Sunderbans, the absence of language in communication, development, women trafficking and much more, he takes the reader through a whirlwind of events and emotions.

SEA OF POPPIES

Sea of Poppies (2008) is a novel by Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh which was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2008. It is the first volume of what will be the *Ibis* trilogy.

The main characters include Deeti, an ordinary village woman, a mulatto American sailor named Zachary Reid, an Indian rajah/zamindar called Neel Rattan Halder, and Benjamin Burnham, an evangelist opium trader.

The story is set prior to the Opium Wars, on the banks of the holy river Ganges and in Calcutta. The author compares the Ganges to the Nile, the lifeline of the Egyptian civilization, attributing the provenance and growth of these civilizations to these selfless, ever-flowing bodies. He portrays the characters as poppy seeds emanating in large numbers from the field to form a sea, where every single seed is uncertain about its future.

Synopsis

The story begins with Deeti, a simple, pious lady, caring mother and an efficient housewife. Married to Hukam Singh, a crippled worker in the Ghazipur Opium Factory, the unfortunate Deeti figures out that on her wedding night, she was drugged with opium by her mother-in-law, so that her brother-in-law could consummate the marriage in place of her infertile husband. This brother-in-law is the real father of Deeti's daughter Kabutri. When her husband dies, Deeti sends Kabutri to stay with relatives. Deeti looks almost certain to meet her doom when she chooses to go through with the sati ritual (immolation on her husband's funeral pyre), but then Kalua, the ox man from the neighbouring village, comes to her rescue. The couple flee and unite. This is not acceptable to their fellow villagers. In order to escape Deeti's in-laws, she and Kalua become indentured servants on the Ibis.

Zachary Reid, an American sailor born to a slave mother and a white father, receives a lot of attention. He has been on the Ibis since the schooner started her arduous journey, and hopes to die with it. He maintains that in his lifetime he has never seen a more admirable article than the Ibis and it is no less than a mother to him, supporting him in his dark hours and rejoicing with him in his happiness. With the support of the head of the lascars, Serang Ali, he becomes the second in command of the ship, when it was refitted to carry indentured labour to the island of Mareech or Mauritius instead of the tradable opium.

Neel Rattan Halder, a wealthy rajah whose dynasty has been ruling the zemindary of Rakshali for centuries, is confronted by Mr. Burnham with the need to sell off his estates in order to pay for the debt he had incurred when trading opium with China at the height of the opium trade.

But now that the opium trade has come to a standstill, as a result of the resistance shown by the Chinese authorities, he is left with no money to clear his loan. When Mr. Burnham proposes to settle the load for Halders zamindary, Halder refueses the deal as the zamindary is his familys ancistral property and selling it would mean turning his back on his many dependents living in his household and zamindary. He is tried for forgery, but it is a sham trial orchestrated by Burnham and his cronies. The court punishes him by sentencing him to work as an indentured labourer for seven years in Mauritius.

It is then that he meets Ah Fatt, a half-Chinese from Canton, half-Parsi opium addict, his sole companion in prison since the two will eventually be transported together on the Ibis.

The book also features Paulette, a French orphan, who has also grown up in India. Her father was an eccentric but kind botanist, and her mother died in childbirth. Mr. and Mrs. Burnham take Paulette into their home after her father's death.

She becomes determined to run away because Mr. Burnham has behaved in a disturbing way with her in private. Also, he is trying to get her married to his friend, the stern, elderly Justice Kendalbushe. As it happens, Paulette had met Zachary Reid, the American sailor, at a dinner at the Burnhams'; she was instantly drawn to him, and he to her. She has resolved to travel to Mauritius, as her great-aunt did, in the hope of finding a better future. Along with Jodu, her childhood friend (or brother, as both Jodu and Paulette are brought up under the care of Jodu's mother following the death of Paulette's mother at childbirth), she boards the Ibis, unaware of her destiny. Paulette easily disguises herself as an Indian woman, using her fluent Bengali, which she learned in childhood growing up at close proximity with Jodu and his mother. Paulette's upbringing in India has also made her feel more at ease with Indian manners, food, and clothing than with Western ones.

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As the stories merge, each carrying its share of joys and sorrows, the Ibis becomes a shelter to those in destitution.

After much strife and bloodshed on board the vessel, Neel, Ah Fatt, Jodu, Serang Ali and Kalua manage to escape, unaware of the destination the sea waves will carry them to.

THE CIRCLE OF REASON

A saga of flight and pursuit, this novel chronicles the adventures of Alu, a young master weaver who is wrongly suspected of being a terrorist. Chased from Bengal to Bombay and on through the Persian Gulf to North Africa by a bird-watching police inspector, Alu encounters along the way a cast of characters as various and as colorful as the epithets with which the author adorns them. The reader is drawn into their lives by incidents tender and outrageousand all compellingly told. Ghosh is as natural a weaver of words as Alu is of cloth, deftly interlacing humor and wisdom to produce a narrative tapestry of surpassing beauty.

IN AN ANTIQUE LAND

In An Antique Land is an ethnography written in narrative form by the Indian writer Amitav Ghosh.

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Summary

The book contains two narratives. The first, an anthropological narrative, revolves around two visits made by Ghosh to two villages in the Nile Delta, while he was writing his doctoral dissertation (1980-81) and again a few years later (1988). In the second narrative, presented parallel to the first one in the book, Ghosh constructs a fictionalized history of a 12th century Jewish merchant, Abraham Ben Yiju, and his slaves Ashu and Bomma, using documents from the Cairo Geniza.

Commentary

In an Antique Land is considered to be a stylistically curious book. Written after the success of Ghosh's first two books, Circle of Reason and The Shadow Lines, and written more than a decade after the dissertation on which the book is based, In an Antique Land defies easy description and has been called "generically indefinable" and could be labeled as "narrative, travel book, autobiographical piece, historical account".

2

Amitav Ghosh and Colonial India

In Post Colonial world, among the post colonial writers Amitav Ghosh is very prominent. His books contain either post colonial scenario or the pre-colonial and colonial scenario. He is an Indian writer and India was ruled by the British for two hundred years. Amitav Ghosh creates vivid images in his books where readers can easily enter into that world of exquisite imagery. Before moving further let us check a short biography of this writer:

> "I always dreamt of becoming a writer"
>
> —*Amitav Ghosh*

Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta, a city which he regards as a constant that runs through all his work. His father was a Lieutenant-Colonel in the army, whose assignments meant that during his youth Ghosh spent time in Sri Lanka, Iran and East Pakistan (later Bangladesh), while being based at boarding school in India. Much of his writing focuses on families. One branch of his own family lived in Burma (Myanmar), a connection which he has traced, in fictional form, in *The Glass Palace* (2000), particularly drawing on the experience of his uncle, the timber-merchant Jagat Chandra Dutta.

Ghosh attended Doon School in Dehra Dun and one of New Delhi's most illustrious educational institutions. St. Stephen's College, during a period which he has seen as characterized by a nationalist self-confidence that evaporated just a few years later. Several of his fellow-students later achieved prominence as novelists or as figures in the Subaltern Studies movement. After leaving St. Stephen's with a B.A. in History in 1976, he obtained an M.A. in Sociology from the University of Delhi in 1978. He went to St. Edmund Hall, Oxford to do postgraduate work and in 1979 obtained a diploma in social anthropology, while also spending time in Tunis learning Arabic. In 1980 he went to Egypt to do fieldwork for his doctoral research under the auspices of the Faculty of Arts; University of Alexandria. He was awarded his Oxford D. Phil. in Social Anthropology for his thesis on "Kinship in Relation to the Economic and Social Organization of an Egyptian Village Community" in 1981. His later ethnographical traveller's tale, *In An Antique Land* (1992), in which the central figure is a researcher who has obvious affinities with Ghosh, can be read as a companion-piece to the thesis.

Ghosh has lived in Delhi, done fieldwork in Cambodia and Burma and written for a wide range of publications. He has held academic positions at a number of universities, including Delhi University, Columbia University and Queens College of the City University of New York, where he is Distinguished Professor. His writing has received numerous awards. These include a Prix Medicis Etranger for *The Circle of Reason* (1986), the Sahitya Akademi Award for *The Shadow Lines* (1988), the Arthur C. Clarke Prize for science fiction for *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), the Pushcart Prize (an award given for stories, poems and essays published in a literary magazine in the U.S) for his essay, "The March of the Novel through History: My Father's Bookcase" and the Grand Prize for Fiction at the Frankfurt International e-Book Awards for *The Glass Palace*. Controversially, he declined the best book award for the Eurasian region of the Commonwealth Writers Prize for *The Glass Palace*, on the grounds that he was unaware that his publishers had entered the book for this Prize and objected to the classification of "Commonwealth

Literature". Ghosh lives in New York with his wife, Deborah Baker, author of *In Extremis: The Life of Laura Riding* (1993) and a senior editor at Little Brown and Co., and his children Leela and Nayan.

There is a moment in *In An Antique Land* when the narrator-persona, a figure whet bears an obvious resemblance to Ghosh himself, is struck by an untypical remark made by one of the Egyptian villagers because it represents an attempt to penetrate his imagination which he sees as analogous to his own method of analysing the lives of the villagers. Such an attempt at imaginative empathy characterizes all Ghosh's writing to date and seems to be the product of a humanist concern to transcend culturally constructed differences. Nevertheless there are common connections between several of his major interests and the concerns of postcolonial theorists who take a constructive view of culture. Like Edward Said. Ghosh draws attention to the artificiality of the East-West binaries of Orientalism.

This is all about Amitav Ghosh and lets move to Colonial India. I have brought the colonial part of India because during colonization Indian people were become a hybrid product and later they became habituated by the western culture. Amitav Ghosh also a product of hybridization. Now let us see what post colonialism is:

> "Post colonialism - postcolonial literature and theory - is concerned with the situation of former subject nations and cultures whose histories have been irremediably altered by the experience of colonialism. Post colonialism looks critically an imperialism and its legacy and seeks to undo the ideologies that underpin and justify imperialists practices. Post colonial writers also works to reclaim the past because their own histories were often erased or discredited under imperialism and to understand their own culture and personal identities and chart their own futures on their own terms rather then the terms superimposed on them by imperialist ideology and practice", *(The Empire Writes Back)*

So, postcolonial literature reflects the effects of colonialism. Through the word *post* we can see that it means the end of the formal colonial rule. If we articulate the word colonization, our mind will first remember the word British and by uttering the word the post colonization we readily look at the world created after the British colonization. Sometimes postcolonial literature questions the importance and relevance of Britishness and Englishness. Perhaps the prominence of post-colonial literature reflects the changing aspects of the British nature itself, which is now called in many cases, transnational literature.

The situation started when British conquered different continents by using different colonial tools. British colonization is a grand process because it took a long time to establish. The British Empire was, at one time, referred to as "the empire on which the sun never sets". Among the British colonies, India was of tremendous importance. British colonizers started to execute the process of colonization in India initially through trade and commerce. But the British colonization got its motion when Robert Clive won the *Battle of Plassey* by defeating the Nawab of Bengal, Siraj Ud Daulah, on 23 June 1757. This victory established East India Company as a military, administrative and commercial power in Bengal for the first time.

With the decline of the Mughal Empire and for the conflict among the local states of India the British colonizers got the opportunities to gain the control of India as a colony. This victory, which resulted in the conquest of Bengal, established the British East India Company as both a military and commercial power. This event is widely regarded as the beginning of British rule in India. The wealth acquired from the Bengal treasury allowed the Company to strengthen its military might significantly. This army (comprised mostly of Indian soldiers, called *sepoys* and led by British officers) conquered most of India's territorial and political domains by the mid 19th century and thus the Company's territories were substantially argumented.

The Company fought mahy wars with local Indian rulers during its conquest of India, the most difficult being the four Anglo-Mysore Wars (between 1766 and 1799) against the South Indian Kingdom of Mysore ruled by Hyder Ali, and later his son Tipu Sultan (The Tiger of Mysore) who developed the use of rockets in warfare. Mysore was only defeated in the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War by the combined forces of Britain and of Mysore's neighbours, for which Hyder Ali and especially Tipu Sultan are remembered in India as legendary rulers. There were, however, a number of other states which the Company could not conquer through military might. Most of there states were in the North. Here the Company intervened through threats and diplomacy and prevented the local rulers from putting up a united struggle against the British rule. By the 1850's the Company ruled over most of the Indian subcontinent and as a result, then it began to function more as a nation and less as a trading institution.

The Company's rule effectively came to an end exactly a century after its victory at Plassey. The Indian Mutiny of 1857 occurred when the Company's Indian *sepoys* rebelled against their British commanders, likely because of political unrest that was triggered by several political events. One such event that surely seemed trivial to the Company at the time but it turned out to have dire consequences, was the Company's introduction of the *Pattern 1853 Enfield* rifle. Its gunpowder containing paper cartridges were claimed to be lubricated with animal fat and had to be bitten open before the powder was poured into the muzzle. Eating cow or pig fat was forbidden for religious reasons for the vast majority of the soldiers. Beef products were forbidden for the Hindu majority, and likewise, pork for the large Muslim minority.

In the past, Indians had feuded as much with other Indians as they did with the British. This has greatly aided the British in their conquest, for example during The Battle of Plassey in which they benefitted from the defection of the opposing army commander. But in 1857, the natives of India actually turned against the East India Company in a body, and this "Mutiny" eventually brought about the end of the Company's rule in India. And although the Indians had achieved a great victory through common purpose in spite of sectional differences, their immediate situation turned for worse.

Although Company and Enfield representatives insisted that neither cow nor pig fat was being used, the rumour persisted and many sepoys refused to follow orders involving the use of the weapons using those particular cartridges. Indian sepoy *Mangal Pandey* was hanged as a punishment for having attacked and injured British superiors at the introduction of the rifle. All these happened at a time when Indians had come to resent decades of British rule under which they felt like second class citizens; exploited and seen as incapable of Home Rule.

The Company's failure to demonstrate effective control over its conquered Indian territories caused British financial and political entities to become uneasy about the security of their interests in India as well as for the future of the Empire. By 1857, India was a tremendously large part of the Empire's economy. The disaster of the Mutiny in particular had a huge influence on the Crown's policy regarding the most effective way to govern India.

As a result, the Crown and British government assumed direct rule over the Indian sub-continent for 90 years following the dissolution of the Company. This period of direct rule in India is referred to as the *The Raj* during which the nations now known as *India, Pakistan, Bangladesh,* and *Myanmar* were collectively known as *British India.*

During colonization there were writers who had observed very closely the British domination. Among these writers we can name, *Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao,* and *R.K. Narayan.* They are the pre-independent Indian writers of British India. They expressed their opinion about the British domination from different perspectives. There was a concept established by the British, which basically suggested that the West is Superior and East is Inferior. When a western writer writes about

India he writes from a colonizer's point of view but a writer from the East doesn't do this. So the Western attitude towards India can be summarized in Macaulay's writing in the book Post-Colonial Literature by Christopher O'Reilly:

> "Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, in opinion and in intellect"

This is what the British wanted from India, a willing slave, who would understand the master's viewpoint and follow without question. However, many of the Indian English writings portray both colonizer and colonized cultures, most prominently their two common religions, Hinduism and Islam. When they write from broader perspectives, they give deep emphasize on their cultural tradition.

Indian English in today's world is truly different from the English of the native English speakers. Indian English is interesting and also complex because it is influenced by the thoughts, philosophy and even the dialects of the sub-continent. English has been first adopted and then adapted by the Indian writers for their own purposes. Now it has become their medium of presenting their own culture and tradition.

The British dominated India and apart from domination they had infiltrated the Indian culture with their own. In India the British established the English education system. Their literary materials were taken to be the hallmark of culture.

They taught their own history and culture. Christopher O'Reilly mentions the writer Mulk Raj Anand in his book *Post-Colonial Literature,* who asked,

> "Renaissance is the cue for all human passion, the freedom to grow, ever to higher consciousness, 'How would you express this in your words? How might those sentiments reflect the broader developments of the time?

The same book records Raja Rao saying:

> "The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought - movement that looks maltreated in an alien language ... we cannot write like the English. We should not. ... Our method of expression has to therefore be a dialect which will sometimes prove to be as a distinctive or colorful as the Irish or American ... the tempo of Indian life must be infused into our English expression."

Today's Indian English is truly Indian English. The writers of India do not follow the ways of the British English writing.

Then there are writers who emerged after the colonial situation. They are basically called the post-colonial writers. Notable among them are Salman Rusdie, Anita Desai, Arundhuti Roy and Amitav Ghosh. Their writings do not directly discuss postcolonial issues. For example, Amitav Ghosh writes in the style of travel writing. His novels attempt to present the colonial, pre colonial and postcolonial worlds through the eyes of an objective narrator.

I have chosen his two novels for my paper and these two books are *In an Antique Land* (1993) and *The Glass Palace* (2000). Discovering continuities between the past and the present, *In an Antique Land* is a traveller's insightful narration of understanding multicultural relations beyond time and social structures set by Western theorists. The writer's experiences in the distant villages and towns in the Nile Delta and his reconstruction of the lives of a Jewish trader and his Indian slave in the eleventh century from documents from the Cairo Geniza lie at the center of this novel in the shape of a traveller's book.

It deals with a lot of history and shows how like most of the colonized nations, the people of Egypt too have lost much of their cultural inheritance. The writer too feels guilty because he has learnt to use Western theories and equipment to uncover a history that is part of his own heritage. *The Glass Palace,* Amitav Ghosh's recent novel is set primarily in

Burma and India and presents the evolving history of those regions before and during the fraught years of the Second World War and India's struggle for independence. It follows the sad demise of the Burmese Royal family at the advent of the British Empire, and shows how the lives of ordinary people rolled on under the circumstances. Ghosh also skillfully depicts the foreigners, especially the Indians, taking advantage of the situation with the teak industry created by the British. The most curious aspect of both of these novels is that even though the author makes good use of Western methods of uncovering history not one of his principal characters is a European. His perspective is always the viewpoint of a subaltern that tries to understand, react and arrange the situation according to his understanding.

3

In an Antique Land

In An Antique Land is the story of Amitav Ghosh's decade of intimacy with the village community. Mixing conversation and research, imagination and scholarship, it is also a charged, eccentric history of the special relationship between two countries, Egypt and India, through nearly ten centuries of parochialism and sympathy, narrow-mindedness and affection.

In an interview about *In an Antique Land* Amitav Ghosh said:

> "No this time I am not writing a novel. Not even sociology, history or bells-letters based on historical research. My new book cannot be described as anyone of these. It's a strange sort of work. Within the parameters of history, I have tried to capture a story, a narrative, without attempting to write a historical novel. You may say as a writer, I have ventured on a technical innovation."

It is the technical novelty as well as the unique art construction that makes the book a distinctive work. This book has been divided into four sections. *"Lataifa'*; *"Nashawy'*, *"Mangalore"* and *"Going Back"*. It begins with *"Prologue"* and ends with *"Epilogue"*. In *"Lataifa"* there is an introduction of historical facts about the *"Egyptian Babilon"* and a description of Ben Azra's Synagogue and its Geniza in Cairo. In *"Nashawy"we* find the historical documentation of the authors childhood in post-partition Dhaka. In *"Mangelore"* we see that the story of Ibn Batuta the folk life of Tulundua, the history of Tulu language and culture.

There are three parallel stories in *In An Antique Land*. First the story of Jewish Merchant Abraham Ben Yiju who came from Aden to Mangalore for trade eight hundred years ago with his Indian slave Bomma. Secondly, the story of modern Egypt that Amitav Ghosh relates from first hand experience in two Egyptian villages. Thirdly, search of Amitav Ghosh's story: his search for the Antique world of Ben Yiju and his slave. The three stories are interrelated and from an intricate texture makes the conscious reader alert. One has to pause and ponder which level of the narrative cut as the functional devise.

The major source of the book's distinction lies, perhaps in its inherent theme, and the origin of the theme can be traced to the deeper layers of history and civilization. The author's perception of the basic character of man and his elemental feelings and emotion has added an extra dimension to the book. We see on one side there is an antique civilization of the twelfth century and on the other, there is an account of the fast changing twentieth century world and also there is a bridgeable gulf between these two. But the accounts of these two completely different worlds reflect some attitudes and behavioral patterns which are identical. They reveal some human relationships that wear away the distance between the middle age and the modern age, between antiquity and modernity and that remain unchanged in the eternal tension between the old and the new.

The historical narrative of *"In An Antique Land"* centres round *Abraham Ben Yiju* and his Indian slave named *Bomma*. It is not easy to present the facts of history in a narrative vein. But, like a master craftsman Amitav Ghosh has intermingled history and narrative with a rare craftsmanship in the story of Ben Yiju. The task was simply exquisite like arranging the world materials in historical sequence and building up the complete account of twelfth century out of the fragmentary documents. Characters and events are viewed from the perspective of the historical research and that makes the narratives appear a truthful account.

Although at few places Amitav Ghosh had to have resources for imagination to fill in certain gaps, he remains more or less faithful to the available materials. He did not sacrifice historical authencity to the claim of fiction. The most intriguing part of the Ben Yiju's story is the relationship with his slave. The slave Bomma gradually appears in the letters written to and by Ben Yiju. Amitav Ghosh's search for the origin of the slave provides the readers with a wonderful study in social anthropology and a valuable "insight into the uses of history". The story will take back to an antiquated world in the middle age when religious, social and geographical divisions had spread over a wide area in the middle east and the Indian subcontinent and it made the crossing of the paths of the Jewish merchant and his Hindu slave possible. It is a strange and a colorful world presented in the style of a traveller's tale. "CAIRO IS EGYPT'S own metaphor for itself'.

It is in the Egyptian remote place that Amitav Ghosh sought to retrieve the antique civilization. His guides in the village were his neighbors Abu Ali, his fat and gargantuan landlord, and Sheikh Musa, the gentle and good humored Village elder, Jabir, the son of Ali's cousin, Amm Taha, Amitav Ghosh's caretaker in Nashawy who had a rare skill, the self-reliant Zaghloul, the superstitious weaver who is very fond of stories.

In *In An Antique Land,* Ghosh describes his historical research. This book contains .lively narrative of his travels between Egypt and India. The significance of these two countries here, is that both can be considered *postcolonial,* and although they might be considered 'Third World' today, they are both 'antique lands'. So they have been home to very advanced civilizations in their long histories. In this journey, Ghosh retraces ancient trade routes between India and the Middle East, and calls to mind travels that occurred outside the European history of travel. In an interview with BBC Ghosh said:

> "Indian merchants and traders have always been travelling, but the difference between that sort of

> globalisation and the globalisation that we see today is that today's is a globalisation of capital. This is a sort of managed travel that we see, it is basically white westerners who get to travel. If you were to experience travel from my perspective you would know that it is a constant bother going to airports because I am Indian."

Unlike much of the English travel writing we have studied, this is not an account of the world through European eyes. Ghosh does not occupy a privileged position. As an Indian, both Egyptians and Indians respond to him as one who might share a similar cultural background and whose countries have built up historical allegiances. Ghosh is introduced by his Egyptian host as a

> "student from India ... a guest who had come to Egypt to do research. It was their duty to welcome me into their midst and make me feel at home because of the long traditions of friendship between India and Egypt. Our countries were very similar, for India like Egypt, was largely an agricultural nation and the majority of its people lived in villages like the Egyptian fellaheen, and ploughed their land with cattle. Our countries were poor, for they had been ransacked by imperialists, and now they were both trying in very similar ways to cope with poverty and all the other problems that had been bequeathed to them by their troubled histories".

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A further example of Ghosh not occupying the privileged position of the Western traveller is in his defensive responses to the Imam's (Muslim priest or chief) charges of backwardness in Ghosh's Hindu culture. The Imam attacks Ghosh for being one of those people who burn their dead and worship cows. When Ghosh admits that he is a Hindu, Ustaz Mustafa says, 'What is this 'Hinduki' thing? ... If it is not Christianity nor Judaeism no Islam what can it be? Who are it's prophets?"

Ghosh and the Imam end up arguing about whether India or Egypt is more advanced using the measure of what destructive power each side's military could muster. Here are these two postcolonial characters caught in an old colonialist vying for power through violence -

> "... the Imam and I: delegates from two superseded civilizations, vying with each other to establish a prior claim to the technology of modern violence."

Here we were then, Ghosh goes on, in the East and of the East, and yet both still travelling in the West. Furthermore, Ghosh then pulls the Westerner' card on the Imam. He (Ghosh) had actually been to the West and knows more about it than the Imam - like the colonial writer, in the end, he claims prior knowledge of the West and, by implication, of the world. Throughout, Ghosh writes with enormous lucidity and flashes of gentle humor, conveying in small and telling details the underlying suspiciousness and insecurity that pervade Egyptian society.

We have already discussed before about Ben Yiju and his slave Somma. If we look at the old Egypt we see that there were no interference and people were independent. They had tradition and hierarchy. They were sometime conservative and their social structure was so immobile. Their language was Arabic through which they could communicate with others. There was a Synagogue in Geniza where the letters were stored.

The image of modern Egypt that Amitav Ghosh's has portrayed in his travelers tale *In An Antique Land* is truly insightful. When Amitav Ghosh revisits the villages after seven years he is astonished by the changes that had overtaken them. There was no electricity at Lataifa in 1980. Someone had brought the diesel water pump from a nearby town. The whole village had gathered on the courtyard of the owner, waiting specially for Amitav Ghosh who had been invited to give his expert opinion, examined the machine. In 1988, he finds refrigerator in every others house, new brick building in place of adobe houses, calculators, TV sets, casset players and even food processor. The people have prospered on gulf money. Most of the young man of the villages have left Egypt by that time to find job in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries. The gleaning from the distant war had worked a silent economic revolution in rural Egypt and changed the life of fellaheen. People have been sending their children to schools and colleges and often they talk about their development.

Today the Egyptians have become modern but the main thing that made a transition from old to modern is the western culture. Once people from different universities came and took away the letters from Synagogue. Then after a research the history of the old Egypt came out. The present people of Egypt have discovered about their past through this history.

Though not as engaging as the contemporary story, the historical one offers a look at a time when global trade brought different cultures and religions together in India and the Middle East. Interestingly, the letter which sparked Ghosh's initial interest turned out to have been part of the most important single collection of medieval documents ever discovered. And what is striking about the era Ghosh researches is that harmony existed among Muslims, Jews and Hindus. Through the historical story, Ghosh demonstrates that the cultural and religious mixing prompted by globalization does not have to result in the hatred and mistrust we see too often today.

By the close of Ghosh's time in Egypt, the Iran-Iraq war has ended, forcing Egyptians to give up their jobs to decommissioned Iraqi soldiers and return home. Accustomed to the lifestyles high wages abroad have brought, the Egyptian men find few prospects at home. Here, the reader becomes aware of the hopelessness that can result when globalization's promises are not met.

An understanding of the culture and day-to-day lives of the poor in other countries is crucial to an assessment of whether they are benefiting from globalization. By taking us into the lives of these Egyptian villagers, Ghosh provides insights into the human consequences of globalization and modernization in the Middle East. While Ghosh shows that prosperity brought about by globalization can improve peoples' lives, conversely, he makes it clear that if globalization's benefits are temporary or only available to a few, it can also lead to hopelessness and despair.

The antique world is not entirely lost. The Bhuta-cult, itself a subversion of the categories of Sanskrit Hinduism, still exist in the fisher folk of Mangalore and despite the sincere efforts of enlightened people like Ustaz Sabri beliefs in ghosts and miracles, and the practice of visiting the graves which constitute the revolutionary counter image of orthodox religions of the Middle East, like Judaism and Islam, are not removed from the people of Nashawy and Lataifa. The partitioning of the past and of the intertwined histories of the two countries notwithstanding, these superstitions which had given rise to the unique culture of accommodation and co-existence, still linger in the psyche of the people. Development and all-consuming influence of politics and religion could not totally efface them. In defiance of the enforcers of history small remnants of Bomma's world have survived in both Egypt and India.

4

On *The Glass Palace*

Published in 2000 *The glass Palace* is Amitav Ghosh's latest expedition in understanding the ravages done by colonialism. It begins in 1885 Burma when the British finally subjugated it and sent the Burmese Royal family into exile. "The glass palace" refers to the Burmese royal palace at Mandalay - to be exact, it is the magnificent hall of mirrors which forms the center-piece of the royal residence. It is the traditional hall where the Burmese monarchs held audience. But it is also the name of a small photo studio in the late twentieth century where the novel *The Glass Palace* ends, the studio which derived its name from its original, as a reminder of the old days when Burma was free, both of the colonial powers and the junta which controls it now.

The book traces the life of Rajkumar, an orphan boy of Indian origin, who after lots of struggles becomes a rich teak merchant. The most notable aspect of the novel is, however, that there is not a single episode in the entire book directly representing the British. They are in the background all right, but they are not brought into the story as characters. Ghosh has treated them almost in the same way 18th or 19th century British writers used the colonized countries -as backgrounds or as references that may affect the life style or the story line, but do not have direct association with the characters. It is actually a short history of a nation seen through the eyes of the subaltern.

As it has been stated earlier, at the center of the novel, there is Rajkumar, and his being an orphan kind of identifies him with the postcolonial identity of a writer. In her essay, "The Road from Mandalay: Reflections on Amitav Ghosh's The glass Palace", Rukmini B. Nair very appropriately observes:

> Rajkumar's symbolic as well as real orphan-hood implies that he has to invent a family where none exists; . . . . Rajkumar has in effect to solve the same dilemma that confronts the postcolonial author .... he has to make sense of the 'exitential' conrundum that plagues all individual who cross .... the well defined lines of 'national identity' and 'family genealogy.'

Not having a family of his own, this remarkable person has to seek out people to claim as his. In Saya John he finds a father, in Matthew a brother, and in Dolly, his soul mate. He is an Indian by birth, has to start looking after himself at an early age, builds his fortune in Burma, comes to India to seek out his bride of whom he had glimpses when he was only 11, goes back to Burma and raises his family, and then again returns to India in old age, after his fortune has been devastated by war, and his elder son and daughter-in-law killed. He has to run away from Burma because he is not a Burmese, and yet, that has been his home all his life. And it is not only Rajkumar, or for his family members or other characters of *The glass Palace,* the cultural space for most of the characters in Ghosh's other novels is huge. As Robert Dixon comments in " 'Travelling in the West' : The Writing of Amitav Ghosh", "This cultural space is a vast, borderless region with its own hybrid languages and practices which circulate without national or religious boundaries."

So, in *The Glass Palace* the positions of the colonizer and the colonized are presented with all the dual complexities and ambiguities associated with the terms. The storyline begins in Mandalay, the capital city of Burma, and the downfall and the subsequent confusion and banishment of the Burmese Royal family are depicted very vividly and realistically. The psychological drama taking place in the minds of the King Thebaw and his Queen Supalayat show the extent of deliberate cruelty and insult that was dealt out to them:

> Just as he was about to step in, the King noticed that his canopy had seven tiers, the number allotted to a nobleman, not the nine due to a King .... In his last encounter with his erstwhile subjects he was to be publicly demoted, like an errant schoolchild. Siaden had guessed right: this was, of all the affronts Thebaw could have imagined, the most hurtful, the most egregious.

The King Thebaw, however, accepts his fate more or less like a pilosopher. As a result of his early trainings of a monk he reigns over the fishermen of Ratnagiri, foretelling when there would be a storm, or how many boats returned from the sea. But it is in Queen Supalayat that one sees the dehumanization of colonial process. She lives in the dilapidated Outram house allowing slums to grow in the surrounding area, and welcomes the few guests she occasionally has in defiance. Her attitude is clear in the proud, thin lipped smile she has for all of them:

> We were the first to be imprisoned in the name of progress; millions more will follow. This is what awaits us all: this is how we will all end as prisoners, in shanytowns born of the plague. A hundred years hence you will read the indictment of Europe's greed in the difference between the Kingdom of Siam and the state of our own enslaved realm.

Ghosh clearly shows that the british may pride themselves in keeping the royal families of India and Burma alive, but the way these princes and princesses are kept, it questions the basic ideology of the Western civilization which the ruling power boasts of.

While looking at this situation one is reminded of Edward Said's record of the dehumanizing process that the Occidentals practiced on the Orient. The Western mind never looked at the Orient or the Orientals as complete human beings. They were "seen through, analyzed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined- as the colonial powers openly coveted their territory-taken over".

A remarkable conversation between Dolly and her friend Uma also gives occasion to question established beliefs and historical facts. On one occasion, Uma, the wife of the Indian Collector, asks Uma about the cruelty of Queen Supalayat. And in reply Dolly makes Uma look at the situation from her end:

> "You know, Uma," she said in her softest voice. "Every time I come to your house, I notice that picture you have hanging by your front door ..."
>
> "Of Queen Victoria, you mean?"
>
> "Don't you sometimes wonder how many people have been killed in Queen Victoria's name? It must be millions wouldn't you say?

This section allows us to see clearly Ghosh's view about the representational dice in pictures or literature. We also observe that Uma accepts her friend's explanation and a few days later removes the picture herself. In this episode Ghosh has demonstrated how prejudiced the norms of civilized behaviours can be under historical and political conditions.

However, it is interesting to note that while showing the subjugated Burma, Ghosh's attitude towards India and the Indians is starkly different from his treatment of the Burmese people. Even though at the center of the novel we have Rajkumar, an Indian born, he is far from being a flawless character. He represents the Indians who benefited through the British colonization. It is true that the British colonized both India and Burma, but in Burma the Burmese are the ones oppressed whereas the Indians as well as people from other countries were given much opportunities to flourish. The rise of Rajkumar is only one of many stories of such success. Through him and the world revolving around him Ghosh shows how colonialism is a process where people and values are compromised.

5

Anthropology as Cultural Translation: Amitav Ghosh's in an Antique Land

Amitav Ghosh is one of the most distinctive and influential writers to come out of India since Rushdie. Throughout his diverse and generically composite *oeuvre* one constant has been his attempt to find connections between seemingly unrelated subjects. Ghosh's fiction challenges the artificial "shadow lines" that have been erected to separate, for example, nations from their neighbours, fact from fiction, and academic disciplines from each other. His interrogation of boundaries accords with the preoccupation with hybridity, "in-between" spaces, and diasporas in postcolonial debate. Although Ghosh dislikes being categorized as "postcolonial," in his writing he frequently focuses on the ways the partitioned South Asian subject has been affected by, and yet can to some extent resist, colonialism's legacy. At the heart of Ghosh's corpus is the contention that knowledge is produced by structures of dominance, particularly the military, economic, and epistemic strategies of colonialism. His main focus is the impact that Western paradigms of knowledge have had and continue to have on India. Ghosh is also crucially concerned with highlighting filiations and connections which go beyond the (neo)colonial relationship, such as the persistence of pre-colonial trade connections between the Indian subcontinent and the Arabian peninsula, or the existence of an Indian community in Burma which was almost entirely erased by nationalism. Finally, in his writing Ghosh constantly experiments with form and genre in order to adumbrate a dialogic, non-coercive method of knowledge transmission.

Nowhere are these concerns more evident than in Ghosh's third book, *In an Antique Land* (1992), a text that straddles the generic borderlines between fact, fiction, autobiography, history, anthropology, and travel book. Ghosh maps ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in the Egyptian villages of Lataifa and Nashawy onto his subsequent research into medieval Indian Ocean trade. In so doing he explores the connections and ruptures between two worlds, the medieval and the contemporary. As the book progresses the two seemingly disparate strands descriptions of the Egyptian families and village communities with whom Ghosh resides in the early 1980s, and the narrative of his attempts to trace "the slave of MS. H.6". increasingly dovetail, each narrative helping to shed light on the other. In this paper I extrapolate the fieldwork strand of *In an Antique Land*, in order to situate it both within and outside intellectual challenges to the discourse of anthropology that have emerged since the 1980s. My findings reinforce the prevalent hypothesis that Ghosh poses radical questions about Western "knowledge." By presenting his multidisciplinary research in a fragmentary and imaginative way, he challenges the claims to definitiveness of academic discourses. Ghosh indicates that knowledge of the Other can only ever be partial, subjective, and historically conditioned. Grand narratives are rejected in favour of "rich confusions" (*Antique* 288).

Anthropology defines itself by its fieldwork methodology. Just as the historian points to time spent in the archives analyzing documentary evidence as the *sine qua non* of the historical discipline, so the anthropologist views time spent "in the field" as integral to any serious attempt to write about another culture. As Bernard S. Cohn writes, "[w]hat a document is to historians, field work is to anthropologists" (232). Yet just as history has been brought into crisis by revelations of the unreliability and partiality of textual documents, so that scholars have acknowledged that any account of history is embedded in its historical and linguistic setting, so too anthropologists have increasingly questioned their discipline in the last few decades. In particular, the ethnographer's participant-observer role and his or her textual representations of oral evidence have come under scrutiny. Ethnographers have long been aware that fieldwork is subject to certain problems. For example, indigenous peoples may act in an artificial way due to the ethnographer's presence; they may present accounts of their culture that they imagine the ethnographer wishes to hear; or they may resist investigation altogether, refusing to answer questions and trying to evade examination. Furthermore, living with others is an inevitably subjective and specific experience.

Anthropology tends to infer that one village or sub-community is representative of a whole society, when it is in fact contingent, representative only of a particular group of individuals at a specific moment. Even the most trenchant apologist for fieldwork is aware of these problems, but from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s a group of anthropologists began to argue that fieldwork is also complicated by its eventual presentation as a text. Even in the unlikely event that the people under study should act normally in the presence of the ethnographer, giving lucid and accurate oral testimonies, the ethnographer still has to translate their lives through the act of writing.

In parallel with the work of theorists of history like Hayden White, these so-called "New Anthropologists"—who include James Clifford, Talal Asad, and Mary Louise Pratt—have sought to locate ethnography as a textualized construction.

This "literary project" within anthropology has received a great deal of attention and criticism. Perhaps the most glaring blind spots that have been identified within the New Anthropology are its curious disregard of anthropologies emanating from the third world, and its tendency to set up as a straw man a monolithic "Western Anthropology" in a way that ignores the variations that exist even within what have been termed the "dominant anthropologies". Recent scholarship has accordingly moved on to realize that anthropology as an example of disciplinary power has played an important part in anti-colonial national projects and the establishment of postcolonial nation-states. For instance, Jomo Kenyatta studied anthropology under Bronislaw Malinowski, while Kwame Nkrumah's uncompleted Ph.D thesis was in "ethnophilosophy," an area closely associated with anthropology (Gyekye xvi-xxiii). While recognizing the "epistemic violence" inherent in anthropology's history, we should thus also remain alert to its "enabling" potential.

Notwithstanding these intellectual limitations, a sustained account of the extent to which *In an Antique Land* is imbricated with the New Anthropology's concerns is worthwhile, and has not yet been undertaken. This essay is an attempt to fill the critical gap. This is particularly necessary given the celebration of Ghosh's writing as an exemplar of the experimental ethnographies endorsed by the New Anthropologists and, more importantly, given the mutual interest of Ghosh and the New Anthropologists in the relationship between anthropology, language and literature. It is to this issue that I will now turn.

Talal Asad has been instrumental in pointing out a comparison between ethnography and the act of translation. In "The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology," he argues that the metaphor of translation is often employed by social anthropologists to elucidate their role. He cites the following statement by Godfrey Lienhardt for its recognition of the similarities between the role of translator and ethnographer: "[t]he problem of describing to others how members of a remote tribe think appear[s] largely as one of translation, of making the coherence primitive thought has in the languages it really lives in, as clear as possible in our own". This comment reveals the many different types of translation that the ethnographer has to tackle in attempting to explain another culture. Most obvious is the literal translation of the other culture from "the languages it really lives in" to "our own." As Asad and John Dixon explain elsewhere, this question of language is an area of concern often neglected by ethnographic theorists. They remind us that most ethnographers have to learn another language in order to interact with the people with whom they live during their fieldwork. They then face the difficulty of translating a different language into their own, often having to explain concepts for which their language has no equivalent.

Many theorists have interpreted this to be a productive, benign process, in which the ethnographer's own language is altered and enriched by the encounter with foreign words and concepts. This is the ideal mode of translation that has been advocated by Walter Benjamin and A.K. Ramanujan, amongst others. Benjamin famously quotes Rudolf Pannwitz:

> Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English. [...] The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. Particularly when translating from a language very remote from his own he must go back to the primal elements of language itself and penetrate to the point where work, image, and tone converge. He must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign tongue.

In a similar vein, the Indian poet and translator A.K. Ramanujan writes, "a translator hopes not only to translate a text, but hopes (against all odds) to translate a non-native reader into a native one". Both writers argue that the translator should transform the spirit of his or her own language by sensitive interaction with the other language, yet both acknowledge the difficulty of achieving this goal. These optimistic views of translation as a way of reworking one's language and unsettling one's cultural assumptions have been challenged by the recent translation theory of Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, and by Asad and Dixon's work on the relationship between anthropology and translation. Bassnett and Trivedi argue that translation has long been entangled in the web of imperial power.

Translation, they suggest, usually takes place in a unidirectional process, with texts from non-Western countries being laid open to the authoritative scrutiny of the West. Asad and Dixon similarly emphasize the unequal statuses of languages in the colonial and post- or neocolonial worlds. They argue that the metamorphosis of language enthusiastically envisioned by such theorists as Benjamin is more likely to occur in a culturally weak language than in one as politically and economically powerful as English. "There is," they write, "a prevailing trend for the language of dominated cultures to accommodate to the demands and concepts of the dominating culture. Equally, there are powerful resistances to making any comparable adjustments within the discursive practices of European scholarship".

In practice, then, translation tends only to remake non-Western languages, while powerful European languages remain virtually untouched by their encounter with other languages and concepts. If ethnography is viewed metaphorically as a translation of other cultures, it becomes clear that it too has tended to unsettle and alter indigenous cultures far more than it has affected the European powers doing the translation. As Anuradha Dingwaney recognizes, both linguistic and cultural translation involve violence, "especially when the culture being translated is constituted as that of the 'other'.

Making a similar point, this time about the anthropological enterprise specifically, Eduardo Restrepo and Arturo Escobar suggest that "anthropologists working at the 'center' learn quickly that they can ignore what is done in peripheral sites at little or no professional cost, while any peripheral anthropologist who similarly ignores the 'center' puts his or her professional competence at issue".

Linguistic issues are therefore not the only ones that arise from the comparison between the ethnographer and the translator. As indicated earlier, it is also important to be aware that the ethnographer translates oral accounts into a written text. The ethnographer records hours of dialogue with members of the studied community and then has to select what he or she considers to be relevant for "writing up." Dissenting voices or information that is not commensurate with the ethnographer's vision may be excluded from the text. The ethnographer also has to choose a narrative form in which to present her findings. Does she conform to the scientism and impersonal style of "classic" ethnography, or does she experiment with form, attempting to represent polyphony by transcribing swathes of dialogue with informants or by using a fragmentary structure? Regardless of what form the ethnographer chooses, she almost inevitably translates the other culture using certain recognizable (Western) tropes, which impose meaning onto a vast complexity. James Clifford goes so far as to argue that "the historical predicament of ethnography" is "the fact that it is always caught up in the invention, not the representation, of cultures". Far from being a transparent reflection of how other people live, then, ethnographic writing translates, selects, and fashions its subjects. Furthermore, as the previous discussion about linguistic translation suggests, this process is never innocent, but is always embedded in existing power relations.

In an Antique Land grapples with related questions surrounding the role of the ethnographer as translator. Ghosh frequently discusses the process of translating words or concepts into another language. As an ethnographic participant-observer in the Egyptian villages of Lataifa and Nashawy, he is irked by the impossibility of translating certain concepts into Arabic. For example, Ghosh is interrogated by the teenaged Jabir about his country's attitude towards circumcision, and he is unable to explain himself adequately due to Arabic's linguistic nuances:

> "You mean," he said in rising disbelief, "there are people in your country who are not circumcised?"
>
> In Arabic the word "circumcise" derives from a root that means "to purify"; to say of someone that they are "uncircumcised" is more or less to call them impure.
>
> "Yes," I answered, "yes, many people in my country are 'impure'." I had no alternative; I was trapped by language.

Here Ghosh alerts us to the fact that linguistic translation is a process fraught with complications, one which often violently alters the meaning of the original. The innocuous word "uncircumcised" becomes highly charged in Arabic, with connotations of impurity and therefore irreligiousness. The comment "I was trapped by language" is an important one as it makes the reader aware of the limitations of any language. Ghosh's frustration with the language barrier contrasts with the tone of traditional ethnographies, where the issue of language is effaced and foreign concepts are explained through smooth, unproblematic translation. Interestingly, in this instance Ghosh reverses the ethnographer's usual dilemma of translating indigenous concepts into his own language. It is the difficulty of explaining nonindigenous ideas to locals that confounds the ethnographer. As so often in *In an Antique Land*, Ghosh is anthropologized by locals rather than the other way round; his language, customs, and cultural practices are defamiliarized by the contempt and incredulity of his supposed subjects of study.

Like all ethnographers, Ghosh has to negotiate the tricky task of translating oral evidence given by native informants into a written text. Early ethnographies tended to rewrite local accounts of culture from a narrative distance, so informants were perceived as a somewhat homogenized "they" who were observed and understood by the detached ethnographer. More recently ethnographers have begun experimenting with dialogue as a more nuanced way of representing oral evidence, so that the Other is given a space to reply, argue, and question. Ghosh follows this newer dialogic model of ethnographic textualization.

The modern-day sections of *In an Antique Land* brim with conversations in which ethnographic subjects joke with the narrator (who is known as "Amitab"), question him about his religion or cultural practices, and in turn inform him about their own beliefs. In interview Ghosh has acknowledged the centrality of conversations to the structure of the text. He attributes this feature not to the movement towards dialogism within anthropology but to James Boswell's *The Life of Johnson*, which he read while living in his Egyptian village and which made him realize "the absolute essentialness of conversations to any kind of narrative".

Whatever his inspiration, the conversational form of *In an Antique Land* allows Ghosh gently to undermine his own narratorial authority. He chooses to include uncomfortable or even humiliating conversations, such as the row he has with the village's Imam about whether Egypt or India has the best armaments. The inclusion of the Imam's dissenting voice, questioning Ghosh's ability to explain Egyptian culture when "he doesn't even write in Arabic", and condemning India's death rites and religious beliefs as "primitive and backward", subverts traditional ethnographic assumptions that indigenous people are illiterate and primitive.

The heated conversation "Amitab" has with the Imam not only provides an example of the villagers answering back within the text, questioning and challenging Ghosh's project, but also foregrounds the issue of Ghosh's position as a third-world ethnographer. As Kirin Narayan rightly argues, any anthropologist—whether "native" or foreign—may be viewed "in terms of shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations" .

Ghosh is self-conscious about the ambiguity of his standing amongst the villagers, acknowledging his privileged position as an anthropologist from that centre of Western academe, Oxford University, as well as his low status as a

Hindu in Egypt. His Indian nationality provokes particularly complex and often contradictory reactions from the community in which he lives, as he is at once seen as insider (fellow inhabitant of a third-world country) and outsider (cow-worshipping, uncircumcised infidel).

As David Scott writes on the peculiar position of the third-world anthropologist, "the postcolonial intellectual stands in an ambiguous place: neither 'inside' nor 'outside,' but occupying a 'between' always open on both sides to contestation". The Egyptians identify with Ghosh as a member of a country which, as Ustaz Sabry tells his friends, has "been ransacked by imperialists" just like Egypt has, and which is similarly trying to alleviate poverty, a deficient agricultural infrastructure, and other colonial residues. At times he is treated with extra respect, as when Khamees begs him to ask the Imam for medicine, arguing, "he'll come if you ask him—he knows you're a foreigner. He'll listen to you". But Khamees's claim that the narrator's foreignness makes him worthy of attention is undermined by the fact that in many frustrating encounters people do not listen to him at all. At times Ghosh's foreignness even leaves him open to suspicion and aggressive interrogation, as when a taxi driver cannot understand his desire to call on Shaikh Musa (112), or when he is taken in for questioning by police about his interest in a Jewish saint.

The villagers see technology as being at least as important a marker of civilization as religion or cultural practices. In a humorous scene the narrator gains respect, even awe, for the knowledge he is assumed to have about a diesel water-pump that is manufactured in India. Yet if his country's technology occasionally causes him to be treated with deference, at other moments it is used against him as a supposed gauge of backwardness. To Ghosh's later chagrin, he ends up bitterly vying with the Imam over whose country has the better "guns and tanks and bombs". He soon realizes that both men are "travelling in the West", speaking the imperialist language that views the invention of violent technology as a measure of civilization.

The ways in which the ethnographer, whether Western or "native," is represented in the ethnographic text have also been interrogated by the New Anthropologists. The ethnographer's experiences in the field of course provoke feelings, desires, dislikes, and prejudice, but these are erased from, or at least marginalized by, realist ethnographic discourse. Mary Louise Pratt reminds us that all ethnographies contain elements of the personal, but in stylized ways.

An informal, personal tone is permitted to intrude into conventional ethnographies, but only when it is confined to prefaces or after words. Pratt argues that these set-pieces—usually describing the ethnographer's arrival, first impressions, and departure—"play the crucial role of anchoring [the ethnographic text] in the intense and authority-giving personal experience of fieldwork" . Yet from the 1960s on ethnographers have become more willing to allow the self to overspill into the main body of the narrative, showing that fieldwork can only be a partial account, highly influenced by the personality and approach of its orchestrator.

Ghosh parodies and subverts the traditional ethnographic trope of confining personal commentary to prefaces or afterwords. He chooses to omit the conventional arrival scene, and his description of the Egyptian village begins with the narrator already settled, somewhat unhappily, at the house of Abu-'Ali. Whereas many classic ethnographies begin with an introduction describing the sense of strangeness felt by the ethnographer on arrival at the field site, and then banish personal observation from the main body of the text, Ghosh makes no mention of his arrival, though his feelings of alienation and the curiosity his presence provokes are emphasized throughout. Ghosh too sandwiches his text between a "Prologue" and an "Epilogue," but it is worth noting that these are more novelistic terms than the scholarly "Preface" or "Afterword," immediately indicating the text's imaginative purchase on anthropology. Yet in a curious reversal of anthropological convention, the Prologue is one of Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight. Since you take up your abode in the compound of some neighbouring white man, trader or missionary, you have nothing to do, but to start at once on your ethnographic work.

Imagine further that you are a beginner, without previous experience, with nothing to guide you and no one to help you. For the white man is temporarily absent, or else unable or unwilling to waste any of his time on you. This exactly describes my first initiation into field work on the south coast of New Guinea. I well remember the long visits I paid to the villages during the first weeks; the feeling of hopelessness and despair after many obstinate but futile attempts had entirely failed to bring me into real touch with the natives, or supply me with any material.

Here, by his unusual use of the second-person narrative voice, Malinowski invites the reader to share his feelings of disorientation. He is candid about his inexperience as an ethnographer and his inability to get "into real touch" with his research subjects. And yet this personal account of Malinowski's initial uncertainty in the field soon gives way to a more confident, generalizing tone. As Pratt suggests, the display of modesty and inexperience revealed in the arrival trope is really a device, a way of asserting the ethnography's authenticity by depicting the hardships of fieldwork, the most straightforwardly academic passages of Ghosh's text, loaded as it is with historical detail, dates, and footnotes. Only in the last two paragraphs does Ghosh situate his interest in the Slave in a subjective space and connect it with his experiences in modern-day Egypt. The Epilogue is more personal, interweaving descriptions of the exodus of Egyptian workers from Iraq at the beginning of the Gulf War with an account of the last reference to Bomma in an ancient manuscript kept in a hitech Philadelphia library. In between the bookends of the Epilogue and Prologue, Ghosh's text continues to intertwine personal details and seemingly irrelevant information with more academic commentary, where conventional ethnographies would limit themselves to a discussion of scholarly topics such as kinship or ritual.

However unconventional its form, the text nonetheless conveys a wealth of detail about the cultural practices of Egyptian villagers. Consider the following passage in which we learn about the Arabic tradition of blood feuds:

> And now, Jabir said, drawing himself up to his full height, there would be a blood feud. That was the law of the Arabs: "Me and my brother against my cousin; me and my cousin against the stranger." This was a serious matter: if a man killed someone, then he and all his male kin on the paternal side could be killed in revenge by the dead man's family. They would have to go and hide with their maternal relatives until their uncles and the shaikhs of the land could talk to the dead man's family and persuade them to come to a council of reconciliation. Then, when the grief of the dead man's family had eased a little, an amnesty would be declared. The two lineages would meet in some safe central place, and in the presence of their elders they would negotiate a blood-money payment. That was thâr, the law of feud; damm, the law of blood; the ancient, immutable law of the Arabs.
>
> "All that for pushing a man off a swing?" I asked, bleary-eyed. Jabir paused to think. "Well, maybe a little one," he said wistfully. "Just a small feud."

In this passage, the complicated process of the blood feud is unraveled in detail, and new technical terms (*thâr* and *damm*) are introduced and explained. This ethnographic information is communicated in an unobtrusive way, slotted as it is into a collage of direct and indirect speech, personal details and irony. The section begins with Jabir making a simple statement (reported through indirect speech) that there would be a blood feud.

The assertion is instantly undercut by the authorial comment that he is "drawing himself up to his full height" while saying it, which indicates his truculent pride in the custom. The narrator goes on to explain the usual sequence of events in a feud, culminating in the declamation (presumably attributable to Jabir) that this is an inevitable, unchanging practice, "the ancient, immutable law of the Arabs." The narrative then returns to the dialogic form, with the narrator's bathetic reminder that the feud in question is only in response to a man being pushed off a swing. Jabir's rejoinder is at once humorous and telling: he hopes there will be "just a small feud," the "wistfulness" of his voice suggesting that he has never in fact witnessed this supposedly "ancient, immutable" custom. Ghosh manages concisely and indirectly to convey that what was once common practice in the Arabic world is today a rare event, regarded nostalgically by the villagers as part of a now superseded heritage.

Soon this interpretation is confirmed by neighbouring villagers' reports that the alleged feud had not transpired, as a "token payment" had sufficed to persuade the wronged family to drop their grievance. Jabir's self-conscious portrayal of the Arabs as a warrior-like, intransigent people is therefore revealed to be a distortion of practices that today usually manifest themselves through ritualized imitation of the past.

It is worth comparing this personal, even playful account of feuding with the more conventional discussions to be found both in Ghosh's own DPhil thesis and in A.P. Stirling's essay "A Death and a Youth Club: Feuding in a Turkish Village." In the former, Ghosh briefly explains the concepts of *thâr* and *damm*, before going on to explain:

> While the fieldwork for this thesis was being done a man from Nashawy was killed by a man from a neighbouring village. On that instance the men of the killer's lineage did not leave the area, for his lineage was the "dominant lineage" (*asl al balad*) of the village and very powerful, while the dead man's relatives were poor and few. They presented no real threat to the killer's lineage who saw no reason to leave the area.

Here the tradition of blood feuds is described entirely from the outside via a third-person narrative voice, while class is perhaps emphasized as more of a contributing factor to the non-occurrence of the feud than in Ghosh's later text. Stirling's essay provides an even more telling contrast with the dialogic description in *In an Antique Land*. A traditional anthropologist writing in 1970, Stirling provides several charts and diagrams to explain the genealogy of the village under discussion, and his writing style is more authoritative and monophonic than Ghosh's. The following passage illustrates well the differences between Ghosh's writing and a more mainstream anthropological approach:

> If a man is in trouble with his neighbours, his patrikin will come to his aid, and in doing so, will be acting together as a group. But it is not only at times of open fighting that this situation occurs. Quiescent hostility is normal in the villages. For this, the villagers use a word "küs," by which they mean a sort of mutual sulking. It implies the state of mind of Achilles in his tent,—one has been wronged or insulted, and broken off normal social relationships. The negative of *kūs* is "to speak to each other"; to say "We are speaking to each other" (*konu*^{s}*uyoruz*) may sometimes mean "We have been reconciled." Any self-respecting lineage is more than likely to be *kūs* with at least one other similar group.

Here Stirling makes several generalizations from the specific feud he has already described, using the universalizing nouns "a man," "patrikin," "the villagers," and "any self-respecting lineage" to suggest that these practices are typical of a wider community than just the village under study. His use of what Johannes Fabian has termed the "ethnographic present" is also striking, as it essentializes the villagers' actions as part of a general unchanging culture. The narrator writes in the third person about the anonymous "villagers" he describes, employing an omniscient voice that seems able to judge what is "normal" in the village, and to translate concepts with confident ease.

Not without humour, Stirling describes *kūs* as "a sort of mutual sulking," but there is no hesitation in his tone when he explains foreign words. He uses the unequivocal verb "mean" to indicate his knowledge of the Turkish language. He also uses a classical analogy of "Achilles in his tent" to vivify his description of *kūs*. Turkish customs are thus rendered comprehensible by allusion to a familiar Western story, rather than being described in such a way that *Western* culture is defamiliarized and challenged in comparison. Ghosh's recording of the direct speech of a named individual and his reluctance to draw definitive conclusions from an isolated instance of feuding stand in marked contrast to the scientism and generalizations of Stirling's approach.

In *In an Antique Land*, Ghosh's narrator is rarely to be seen working on the collection of ethnographic data. In one of the few moments in which we are reminded of his academic project, a studious villager gives him unsolicited information while he is trying to have a conversation with someone else:

> "Women use their forefingers to push corn down the throats of their geese," added Shaikh Musa's son Ahmed, an earnest young man, who was a great deal more heedful of my duties as a gatherer of information than I. "Corn, as you ought to know, is harvested just before winter, towards the start of the Coptic year which begins in the month of Tût..."

This passage is revealing because it indicates that Ahmed is familiar with the kind of evidence required for ethnographic study: he tells the narrator about agricultural affairs and the locals' conception of time. The subtext here is that informants are not innocent, but that they are subjects self-consciously shaping an identity for the ethnographer to record. This sensitive portrayal unsettles ethnographic assumptions that indigenous communities are unaware of how they are perceived from the outside, and that the Other believes his or her cultural practices to be normative. Cultural assumptions are intertextual, with people judging their own and others' cultures according to standards derived from ethnographies, films, and journalism. As James Clifford remarks, "suddenly cultural data cease to move smoothly from oral performance into descriptive writing. Now data also move from text to text, inscription becomes transcription". Furthermore, in the cited passage the ethnographer and the local's roles are reversed, as the "earnest" Ahmed is at pains to steer the narrator back towards his research topics, whereas the latter is more interested in anecdotes and gossip.

Many questions surrounding the ethnographer's role and persona are posed by the New Anthropologists. Does he or she have authority (benign or otherwise), or is he or she a simpleton, the dupe of wily locals? How much does his or her voice intrude into the narrative, through the use of the first person and the expression of personal opinions? The example given above suggests that Ghosh's narrative persona is presented in a modest, self-deprecating light as one who has little authority and who has to be taught even the community's most basic customs. The "I" figure is omnipresent in the narrative, but his position is constantly shifting. Renato Rosaldo has drawn attention to the "tripartite author functions" that he argues exist in most ethnographies: "(a) the individual who wrote the work, (b) the textualized persona of the narrator, and (c) the textualized persona of the field investigator". This is a useful division for understanding Ghosh's "I" narrator, as it draws attention to the fact that "the individual who wrote the work" is largely absent from *In an Antique Land*. We do learn certain autobiographical details about this individual, such as his educational history and his involvement in a communalist riot in Dhaka in 1964, but about his life at the time of writing we are told very little. His sexual and romantic life, for example, is entirely erased from the narrative, which is perhaps indicative of conformity to ethnography's taboo against admitting that desire or sexual attachments exist during fieldwork.

Ghosh's "I" narrator tends to slide between "the textualized persona of the narrator," a thoughtful, perceptive scholar who muses on his experiences in the village and offsets them against his knowledge of Mediterranean history, and "the textualized persona of the field investigator," who is a more comic character. The "I" figure is therefore highly multiplex: he is both the academic—at once ethnographer, historian, and linguist—and the *naïf*, a childlike being who is supposed not to know even basic information about sex and nature. Sometimes this naïveté is portrayed as being a result of incomplete knowledge of Arabic, as when he causes consternation by his admission that he has never heard the word for "sex" before.

At other times Ghosh plays along with the idea of himself as a simpleton out of what appears to be sheer exasperation. After young men laugh at him for not understanding the Arabic for "sex" or "masturbation," the narrator willfully decides to exaggerate their stereotypes of him, claiming that he believes the reflection of the moon in a pond is the light from Ahmed's torch.

These examples of the narrator's misunderstandings lead to their surprise if he shares any attitudes or cultural practices with them. Thus when Ghosh congratulates Khamees on a boy he takes to be his son, Khamees is pleased but astonished that "[h]e understands that people are happy when they have children," concluding, "he's not as upside down as we thought".

The language Khamees uses here recalls the cautionary tale about the upside-down house that Tha'mma tells her sister in Ghosh's previous novel, *The Shadow Lines*. Many of the villagers thus view Ghosh in a quasi-Orientalist way as an Other, a topsy-turvy being who does everything differently. This is why Ghosh is touched when Nabeel tries to put himself in the Indian's situation, commenting that he must miss people at home when he puts the kettle on with just enough water for one. In response to this compassion Ghosh writes:

> The conversation quickly turned to something else, but Nabeel's comment stayed in my mind; I was never able to forget it, for it was the first time that anyone in Lataifa or Nashawy had attempted an enterprise similar to mine to enter my imagination and look at my situation as it might appear to me.

Here Ghosh aligns Nabeel's moment of insight with his own ethnographic "enterprise," arguing that both are attempts to look at the world from another's point of view. Ghosh's equation of anthropology with the attempt "to enter my imagination and look at my situation as it might appear to me" suggests that he believes the ethnographer's most important quality should be empathy, the ability to put him- or herself in someone else's shoes. He is not alone in arguing this. In his by now classic anthropological manifesto, Malinowski writes that the ethnographer should seek to "grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realise *his* vision of *his* world".

And yet, the work of the New Anthropologists, *inter alia*, has also shown that the concept of a stable, monolithic "Other" has splintered into a proliferation of "others." Malinowski's use of the emphasized word "*his*" in the statement above indicates that the worldview of orthodox ethnographers tends to exclude at least half of the population, as women's experiences are often not taken into consideration. Recent ethnographies are more sensitive to the fact that every subject has a unique identity constituted by factors such as gender, race, age, sex, class, and religion. Thus, in order to "enter the imagination" of the villagers Ghosh has to put himself in the position of a variety of different "others." He is quite successful in bringing out the tensions between different social classes within the village.

For example, he explains that the village was founded by two men, whose descendents, the Badawy and Abu-Kanaka lineages, took on the roles of landowners and Imams respectively (117-19). Below these two important groups is a sub-class, the Jammâl lineage. Despite the financial gains the Jammâl have made since the 1952 Revolution, this group is considered "outside the boundaries of respectability" (164) by many of the Badawy and Abu-Kanaka. By detailing village hierarchies Ghosh makes us aware that some individuals, such as Khamees the Rat (a Jammâl), are restricted by prejudice and class.

His treatment of gender is arguably somewhat less perceptive, with few women appearing in the narrative in any depth. James Clifford writes of Ghosh's short story "The Imam and the Indian," that "we hear little from women except a few, usually giddy, exclamations" There is little more insight into women's lives in the longer text. One of the few women we are introduced to is Khamees's sister, Busaina, who has left her husband and moved back to her parents' house with her small child. The story is intriguing, and yet Busaina's predicament is little more than a sketch.

We see her cheerful resourcefulness when she is trying to sell inferior vegetables at the Thursday *souk* (186-7), but this vignette is not developed to examine her situation as a single mother. Whether the lack of women's voices in *In an Antique Land* is due to Ghosh's restricted access to women's stories or to his greater interest in men's affairs is hard to say, but the female sex is an Other whose story is not greatly illuminated here.

One final problem of the "dominant anthropologies" that has been highlighted by their critics is their tendency to erase historical and environmental factors that may affect the people under study. Arjun Appadurai points out that place is only sketchily delineated in most ethnographical works. He writes, "[t]he circumstances in which [...] [ethnographic] evidence is gathered (those of fieldwork) and the circumstances of the writing up of fieldwork have been much discussed [...]. But [...] the spatial dimension of this circumstantiality has not been thought about very much". Ghosh refuses to abstract his ethnographic subjects from their physical environment in the way that Appadurai suggests many ethnographers do.

Instead he draws our attention to the tangible nature of the space in which he finds himself, describing many different settings, such as open fields, interiors of houses, and the marketplace. In a memorable passage he describes how he got lost in a warren of lanes when trying to find Ustaz Sabry's house:

> I set off for his house a little before the sunset prayers, and in my eagerness to get there I forgot to find out exactly where he lived. As a result I was soon lost, for Nashawy was much larger than Lataifa, with its houses squeezed close together around a labyrinth of tunnel-like lanes, some of which came to unexpected dead ends while others circled back upon themselves. [...] After I had passed through the square a second time I swallowed my pride and turning to the long train of children who had attached themselves to me, I asked the tallest among them to lead me to Ustaz Sabry's door.

While most ethnographers describe space—where they discuss it at all—in a confident, factual manner, here Ghosh describes his location as a puzzle or "labyrinth" in which he is soon utterly bewildered. Similarly, whereas some ethnographers construct maps of the areas in which they reside, suggesting that they have cartographical skills to represent the land which locals do not possess, Ghosh is reduced to asking local children directions. This passage may be read as an allegorical account of Ghosh's entire ethnographic project. Rejecting the lofty vantage point and third-person omniscience of much ethnographic writing, here we see the narrator admitting his disorientation in the village. Furthermore, historical factors, such as the impact of colonialism on indigenous societies, are particularly difficult for ethnographies to acknowledge.

Imperial domination has of course been one of the main factors allowing ethnographers easy access to "primitive" field sites. As David Scott observes, "[t]he very possibility of the anthropological journey has been linked to the historical occasion of Western European expansion". And yet this facilitating bond between colonialism and anthropology is written out of most ethnographic texts. Traditionally ethnographers have striven to recover a precolonial mindset, unsullied by the West or by contemporary political tensions. For example, in Margaret Mead's classic text *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), the reverberations of colonialism on the culture under study are largely erased from the narrative, and the

Samoans are represented as a simple people, uncorrupted by Western influence. Ghosh firmly rejects the ethnographic attempt to extricate brightened here and there by bold patches of lalang grass. The coast is broken first by a series of small, land-locked bays or lagoons, with a flat, alluvial foreshore, and then from South Cape the coast stretches in an almost unbroken line, for several miles, to the end of the mainland.

The limited human gaze is rejected here in favour of a panoramic vision that functions like a cinematic camera panning over the landscape. Malinowski's use of the first-person plural invites us to share his panoptical view of the New Guinea landscape, in a device similar to that used at the beginning of *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. Space, then, is depicted as posing no problems of representation for the ethnographer. His roving eye follows the contours of the land without impediment, over hills, sea, and jungle. Narratorial perspective is elevated far above the prosaic realities of life "on the ground" in the field site, in stark contrast to Ghosh's depiction of himself hopelessly lost in the Egyptian township.

E.E. Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer*, for example, contains fifteen maps and "textfigures," which include maps depicting "Approximate area occupied by the Nuer" and "The Nuer and neighbouring peoples." Sarah Lloyd's *An Indian Attachment*, which is a mixture of travel account, autobiography, and ethnography that is still fairly Eurocentric in its approach, also contains several maps of the village in which Lloyd resides.

Consider the way in which Mead represents Samoan culture as entirely devoid of political, religious, and legal institutions compared with the more "developed" society of the West:

> In complicated civilizations like those of Europe, or the higher civilizations of the East, years of study are necessary before the student can begin to understand the forces at work within them. A study of the French family alone would involve a preliminary study of

French history, of French law, of the Catholic and Protestant attitudes towards sex and personal relations. A primitive people without a written language present a the "primitive mind" undamaged from the wreckage of colonialism. He is constantly at pains to show imperialism's legacy, whether through the account of his ugly argument with the Imam about weaponry, or of the villagers' feelings of inferiority because of their adobe huts and basic agricultural tools. Furthermore, Ghosh is aware that a new manifestation of imperialism is emerging from the "oil encounter" in the Gulf states. He depicts a village of people who may have wildly distorted views about both India and the West, but they have intimate knowledge of life in the Gulf states, especially Iraq. He explores the advantages and disadvantages that arise from villagers' migration to Iraq, showing both the great material wealth that villagers accrue from work "outside," and the hatred and prejudice they provoke in that country. In a stark scene near the end of the text he indicates how caught up the waves of migrants in Iraq are in the modern-day neocolonial system. Because of the Western Allies' attack on Iraq, thousands of Egyptian men are forced to flee the country in a Biblical scene of deprivation and despair. In the text's final paragraph Ghosh describes watching the "epic exodus" on the television news, desperately scanning the images for a glimpse of his friend Nabeel, but with no success as he has "vanished into the anonymity of History".

Unlike more insular ethnographies, then, Ghosh is always at pains to set his village community against the international historical context. The "anonymity of History" is constantly counterbalanced by his imaginative re-constructions of historical and contemporary characters.

In sum, in *In an Antique Land* Ghosh grapples with the problem of representing the Other. He rejects any single historical or much less elaborate problem, and a trained student can master the fundamental structure of a primitive society in a few months.

Here Mead suggests that the oral nature of "primitive" societies engenders their structural simplicity. She dismisses the very idea of Samoan social and political organizations, in contrast with France's intricate "history, [...] law, [...] [and] attitudes towards sex." She also ignores the upheavals that imperialism have caused within the structure of Samoan society, depicting it as an ancient, unchanging system. Refuting her ahistorical approach to Samoan culture, Derek Freeman has shown that the decade in which Mead was writing, the 1920s, was a period of great unrest and change, with the different Samoan islands in revolt against their American and New Zealand colonizers. He also demonstrates that far from being a simple system that can be learnt "in a few months," Samoan society is made up of complex political organizations and social classes.

Examples of the villagers' ignorance about India and the West include Ustaz Mustafa's gross simplification of India as a place in which "[t]here is a lot of chilli in the food and when a man dies his wife is dragged away and burnt alive" and the Imam's belief that there is no cremation in the West. In contrast, even such villagers as Jabir, who never get the opportunity to go abroad, have detailed knowledge about wages, living conditions, and jobs in Iraq because of the great number of men from the village who have worked in that country, anthropological account's claim to provide an authentic and complete version of the Other. His discussion of anthropology suggests that its fieldwork methodology is based on concealed relations of dominance. The Other's specificity tends to be elided in ethnographic research, as generalizations about the community are made at the expense of discussion about gender, class, age, and historical circumstances. In place of the epistemically coercive discourses of history and anthropology, Ghosh offers a deliberately partial and dialogic narrative. He suggests that to provide a non-coercive translation of alterity, the text should be multi-faceted, imaginative, and open-ended.

6

Silence, Speech, and Shadowiness: Amitav Ghosh's the Shadow Lines

As the title suggests, Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines centers on the shadowiness of existing borders. The author's interest as an Indian-born American lies in making the lines between the personal and public shadowy. In his local library, the unnamed narrator makes archival researches into the street riots in Calcutta, 1964, because no one but him seems unable to recollect the events: "they had dropped out of memory into the crater of a volcano of silence". In the light of other events that happened in post-Partition Dhaka or postcolonial India, the riots were rather small events, but what matters most to him is that they did happen: according to "the edition of Saturday, January 1964, and sure enough, there it was: a huge banner headline which said: Curfew in Calcutta, Police Open Fire, 10 dead, 15 wounded". Rather than ascertaining whether the author tells us an historical fact, we are set the task of assessing the narrator's transformation of his memory into the reality, since he reconstructs his private history and public history in order to reveal "the shadow lines."

The narrator's researches are made by his indigenous effort to transform his private story into the public history. Viewed from other standpoint, the correlation between story and history is that between literature and history, if those disciplines can be assumed to deal respectively with fictional and actual events (albeit broadly defined). In an essay entitled "A Literary Representation of the Subaltern," Gayatri Spivak argues that those discourses are possibly inseparable from one another: "What is called history will always seem more real to us than what is called literature," but "the archival or archeological work of historiography might resemble a certain work of reading which is usually associated with literary interpretation". In short, she is suggestive of a resemblance between historiographical approach to events and critical approach to texts.

Spivak's particular stress in the abovementioned essay is placed on the need of traffic between literature and history. In The Shadow Lines, the narrator actualizes this very trafficability by making archaeological rediscoveries of the past, and it is in this context that Ghosh's academic background is worth remarking: he received a B.A. in History, a M.A. in Sociology, and a Ph.D. in Social Anthropology.

That he has crossed the disciplinary boundaries among history, sociology, and archaeology is indicative of his great interest in interdisciplinarity. The practice of interdisciplinarity can then be said to have close relevance to that of postcoloniality. For one thing, "postcolonialism is a heterogeneous field of study". For another, "interdisciplinary undertakings have revealed how, when used comparatively, the idea of the 'West' has been employed repeatedly to the disadvantage of its discursive opposites (the 'Orient,' the 'Third World,' 'newly liberated peoples')".

In brief, such "discursive opposites" as "the Orient" and "the Third World" have been exploited so as to articulate "the idea of the West." What enables us to recognize their existence is a wide variety of "inter disciplinary undertakings," each of which is in essence an attempt to demonstrate that the discursive goes interdiscursive—that outside a discourse (e.g. colonial/imperial discourse) there is another discourse (e.g. postcolonial discourse). The point in practicing "interdisciplinarity — an endless combination and recombination of genres and discourses — " is to speak of what has been excluded from a given discourse; by doing so, the practitioner will be able to discover silence within discourse and shadowiness between discourses. As mentioned earlier, Ghosh's narrator likens his researches into the riots to those "into the crater of a volcano of silence." That is to say, he takes plunge into the discourse of silence. It can reasonably be said, then, that "The Shadow Lines is an archaeology of silences, a slow brushing away of the cobwebs of modern Indian memory, a repeated return to those absences and fissures that mark the sites of personal and national trauma". In postcolonial India, the narrator translates "archaeology of silences" into action so as not to translate "silences" into "absences." Thus he comes to realize the following:

"The enemy of silence is speech, but there can be no speech without words". Here he polarizes between "silence" and "speech." As we shall see, their polarity is quite crucial for postcolonial writing, by which what has been unspoken is revealed. The present study conducts an analysis of writing by Ghosh, providing insights into the act of speaking for the benefit of postcoloniality as interdiscursivity.

It goes without saying that words are not only to be written but to be spoken. It is then important to remember that The Shadow Lines is written in the first person —which means that the narrator speaks to us with words he writes in order not to let the past pass into silence:

> "Every word I write about those events of 1964 is the product of a struggle with silence", for "once the riots had started they produce thousands of words of accurate description. But once they were over and there was nothing left to describe they never speak of it again".

Basically, "words of accurate description" are used to be written, but they must also be spoken to let them reappear both in memory and in history. In a context of postcolonial production of knowledge or narrative, therefore, speech is of particular significance. At the close of her representative essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak draws the following conclusion: "The subaltern cannot speak" . "In that paper," reflects she, "I suggested that the subaltern could not 'speak' because, in the absence of institutionally validated agency, there was no listening subject". This is exactly why she argues against violence in both epistemic and hegemonic terms.

Similarly, Ghosh's answer for the question she poses can be supposed to be negative, although his narrator speaks of the riots not only for himself but for others, including his father: "And yet he knew, and they must have known too, all the canny journalists: everybody must have known in some voiceless part of themselves — for events on that scale cannot happen without portents. If they knew, why couldn't they speak of it?" In this fashion, or in this fiction wherein "[k]nowing and not knowing are so intricately linked", he gets to discover the subaltern, rather than the nation, to be those unaware of "some voiceless part of themselves." It can then be said that speaking of what (has) really happened enables him to play an important role as an indigenous agent of those who cannot "speak of it."

In The Shadow Lines, therefore, "the subaltern cannot speak." That is to say, the narrator cannot make their voice heard; what he can do utmost is to direct his and our attention to them, just as done by Spivak. The problem confronting him and her is the standpoint from which they speak for the subaltern. In Spivak's case, it is currently the United States. Born in India in 1942, Professor Spivak received a B.A. at the University of Calcutta, came to the United States in 1961 and then graduated with a Ph.D. from Cornell University in 1967. It is well known that she is one of the original editorial members of the Subaltern Studies Group and has raised her voice for subalterns, especially those from India. That she has been speaking from America, not India, has often been open to criticism, however. This issue can best be understood by examining the dispute between her provocative essay and its reactive essay.

In her essay on Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea, Spivak draws much closer attention to Antoinette/Bertha than her black servant Christophine (let alone other blacks such as Amelie), who is deprived of her perspective and is driven out of the narrative: "Christophine is tangential to this narrative. She cannot be contained by a novel which rewrites a canonical text within the European novelistic tradition in the interest of the white Creole, rather than the native". Spivak's treatment of Christophine in connection with Antoinette/Bertha as "the white Creole" has been the subject of much controversy. An obvious example is seen in Benita Parry's "Two Native Voices in Wide Sargasso Sea," in which Christophine is purposefully rediscovered to be "the possessor and practitioner of an alternative tradition" who "delivers a frontal assault against antagonists, and as such constitutes a counter-discourse".

Such critical forms of utterance as "frontal assault" and "counterdiscourse" imply that the novel can be heard as a double-voiced text in a manner employed by Henry Louis Gates Jr. As a multiculturalist, he sees an ethnic writer's text as "inherently double-voiced, drawing on energies from both white and black cultural traditions to produce the complex mode of discourse". Consciously or not, Parry has internalized the notion of double-voiced textuality, since she listens intensively to the voices of the women from different ethnic backgrounds, Antoinette/Bertha and Christophine. Accordingly, at the end of her essay, she directs her critical attention to Spivak: "Spivak's deliberated deafness to the native voice where it is to be heard, is at variance with her acute hearing of the unsaid in modes of Western feminist criticism," and "Spivak in her own writings severely restricts (eliminates?) the space in which the colonized can be written back into history, even when 'interventionist possibilities' are exploited through the deconstructive strategies by the post-colonial intellectual".

Ironically enough, Parry's argument is that "Spivak's deliberated deafness to the native voice" shows her deliberated openness to "modes of Western feminist criticism," by means of which she has established her own status as a "postcolonial intellectual." More often than not, the conflict between intellectuals is politicized in the secular sense of the power/knowledge nexus. In the Introduction to Feminisms, for instance, the editors reach the conclusion that "there is no unchanging feminist orthodoxy, no settled feminist conventions, no static feminist analyses. Feminism is diverse and it is dynamic". In actual fact, the same holds true even for postcolonial feminism, just as shown by Parry's criticism of Spivak's.

More importantly, however, Spivak offers a counter-argument against Parry, who has charged her and other leading postcolonial critics, Homi Bhabha and Abdul JanMohammed: "When Benita Parry takes us to task for not being able to listen to the natives, or to let the natives speak, she forgets that the three of us, post-colonials, are 'natives' too. We talk like Defoe's Friday, only much better". It is by no means unreasonable to associate her counterreply with multiculturality, given the following statement of Gates: "Yet commonsense reminds us that we are all ethnic". Spivak's principle of we-are-allnatives and Gates's principle of we-are-all-ethnic are doubly significant: they take into account their global and local perspectives.

In order to develop multicultural/postcolonial theory on a broader scale, Gates says, we must paradoxically, yet positively, accept that "our own theoretical reflections must be as provisional, reactive, and local as the texts we reflect upon" . What he means here is that multicultural/postcolonial critics need not only to situate themselves as intellectuals in general but also to domesticate themselves as locals in particular. Spivak holds similar concern:

> Whatever the identitarian ethnicist claims of native or fundamental origin (implicit, for example, Patty's exhortation of to hear the voice of the native), the political claims that are most urgent in decolonized space are tacitly recognized as coded within the legacy of imperialism: nationhood, constitutionality, citizenship, democracy, even culturalism.

Spivak points to the paradox that our seemingly common usage of such "political claims" as "constitutionality," "citizenship," and "culturalism" has actually been regionalized or "recognized as coded within the legacy of imperialism." Doubtless, she is here conscious of Parry's argument that she has been notoriously open to intellectual Westernization. Thus she makes the following counterstatement: "My special word to Parry, however, is that her effort as well as mine are judged by the exclusions practiced through the intricate workings of the techniques of knowledge and the strategies of power".

In order not to uproot their postcolonial (feminist) efforts, however contested, we must always remember that "our own theoretical reflections must be as provisional, reactive, and local as the texts we reflect upon." It is hence necessary to make literally down-to-earth "our own theoretical reflections," especially when it comes to "the texts we reflect upon." In this point, The Shadow Lines is highly worth reflecting upon as one of those texts, given that the author aims at domesticating himself by domesticating his narrator in postcolonial India.

Born in Dhaka in 1956, Ghosh graduated from Delhi University, went on to take a Ph.D. at Oxford, and teaches currently at Columbia University, whose professors include Spivak. Both Spivak and Ghosh have thus paid special attention to Indians from the United States. Does this mean that he is one of those postcolonial intellectuals charged as incapable of listening to the natives or letting the natives speak? The answer may be yes, considering that he gives no voice to the subalterns in, at least, The Shadow Lines. What counts far more is his narrator, however. With an emphatic sense of nativity, Ghosh speaks for the subaltern through his fictitious spokesman's narration. Imaginatively enough, as stated above, therefore, Ghosh invents the native narrator situated within postcolonial India. In this context, the narrator's own position must be brought into sharp focus: he speaks from the middle of nowhere.

Since the novel is narrated through his recollection of persons and his reflection on events that dominated his early life in Calcutta in the 1960s (and later in London), the reader has next to no clue what he is. Given his postcolonial approach to silences and his personal stance on subalterns, however, we can tell that he occupies an in-between position: he, as a native in a narrative, is situated between those who can speak (e.g. "all the canny journalists") and those who cannot, namely those who "must have known in some voiceless part of themselves." More particularly, during his childhood he was placed between his father who could know but could not speak and his father's brother's cousin, Tridib. As we will see, Tridib plays an important part as a kind of mentor who gives the narrator lessons in knowing and speaking through imagination and desire, each of which is fundamental to As a child, the narrator projected his self onto Tridib, a diplomat's son who is well traveled but chooses his life to live in Calcutta where he works at Ph.D. in Archaeology. Looking back upon his childhood, he says:

> "Tridib was an archaeologist, he was not interested in fairly lands: the one thing he wanted to teach me, he used to say, was to use my imagination with precision" (24). Tridib's archaeological lesson tells us that imagination is in principle a vehicle for polarization, just as England and Jamaica/Dominica are mutually mystified as "fairly lands" in Wide Sargasso Sea. For Antoinette/Bertha, "England must be quite unreal and like a dream", and, for her husband, Jamaica/Dominica appears "quite unreal and like a dream". Apparently, it is their imagination that romanticizes each other's home as "there."

By comparison, "imagination with precision" is in essence a vehicle for depolarization: it enables natives to transcend borders that have distinguished between "here" and "there." To put it in different terms, Ghosh attaches great importance to imagination as a counterforce against distinction. As Said puts it, "imaginative geography of the 'our land-barbarian land' variety does not require that the barbarians acknowledge the distinction. It is enough for 'us' to set up these boundaries in our own minds; 'they' becomes 'they' accordingly". For recapitulation: the boundaries drawn by "us" are no more than imaginary because they are drawn "in our minds" wherein "'they' becomes 'they.'" Thanks to Tridib, the narrator is now able to disqualify those arbitrary boundaries since he knows that "they had drawn their borders believing in that pattern, in the enchantment of lines". Of equal importance is that he has also known "that a place does not merely exist, that it has to be invented in one's imagination". What does he mean by "one's imagination"? It is vitally significant to note that the protagonist's imagination, unlike the colonialist/imperialist's, is a vehicle not for distinction but for dissolution: it enables him to know and speak about other periods and places as precisely as possible; it is therefore an argumentation to write about what really happened, "which means to be able to recognize the contemporaneity of the past, to be able to see historical memory as vital to any understanding of the present, and to be able to see different times and places as inextricably intertwined with one's own".

The Shadow Lines can then be seen as a story of mirror-image relations between periods and between places - "the contemporaneity" and "the past," "historical memory" and "the present," and "different times and places" and "one's own." Far from insignificant, Ghosh's introduction of these reflective mirror-images into his fiction renders him dissimilar to writers like E. M. Forster or several writers from India:

> When it comes to east and west, Forster, in A Passage to India, ruled out the possibility of even a limited meeting-ground between the two under conditions of imperialistic domination. Several Indian writers have also explored this theme, not so much in terms of whether the two can meet or no as in terms of the political and cultural consequences of the historical fact that they have met and, what is more, have been locked together for years in a colonized-colonizer relationship.

The Shadow Lines is admittedly set in postcolonial India. At the same time, however, the novel deals not only with "a colonized-colonizer relationship" that excludes "the possibility of even a limited meetingground between the two," for it is also concerned with "whether the two can meet." The point is reflexivity, not exclusivity. The narrator refers to his investigation of the riots as "a voyage into a land outside space," and it is "a land of looking-glass events". By "looking-glass events," he means mutual reflexivity between the sphere of one's own and the sphere of our own. Notably, his concept of reflexivity derives from Tridib, who has ever told him "that one could never know anything except through desire, real desire, which was not the same thing as greed or lust; a pure, painful and primitive desire" which "carried one beyond the limits of one's mind to other times and other places". Tridib's "imagination with precision" is based on "real desire" or "pure, painful, primitive desire," by which one can imaginatively, albeit precisely, situate oneself in "other times and other places." The reflection between one and oneself contrasts markedly with the distinction between self and other. What is achieved by the praxis of reflexivity is hence depolarization, through which it becomes feasible to accelerate decentralization and decolonization. It is then worth drawing a parallel between the narrator's depolarization and the polarization by his grandmother and cousin, Tha'mma and Ila.

As stated earlier, the narrator transforms his private story into the public history. Such transformation is also exemplified by Tha'mma. When she was a schoolmistress, she wanted to make a terrorist attack on the colonial government of the Empire. "'It was for our freedom,'" she reflects, "would have done anything to be freel". Tha'mma has struggled for both personal and national freedom; that is, "her" private ideal of freedom is entirely defined by "our" public ideal of freedom. It is in this very point that her struggle for national freedom presents a sharp contrast to Ila's desire for personal freedom: she leaves Calcutta for London simply because she wants to be free. Free of what? This is precisely the narrator's question, and: "Free of you\she shouted back. Free of your bloody culture and all of you" (89).

Tha'mma's nationalism and Ila's internationalism form a stark contrast to one another. This is why the former has an antipathy against the latter as antinational. Viewed from another angle, however, they do have something in common with each other: they gain neither national nor personal freedom. For Tha'mma, it is one's blood-consciousness that sharpens his/her sense of nationhood; she cannot hence recognize the significance of the crossing of borders. It can be assumed, then, that her firm disbelief in "them" is based on her firm belief in "us." As the story unravels, moreover, the reader notices that she has gained next to nothing; rather, she plays a unique role as a "loser" in the literal sense: her birthplace Dhaka was changed by "them," her nephew Tridib was killed by "them," and her gold was gifted to the war fund "to kill them before they kill us" and "to wipe them out".

In contrast, Ila's belief is that her internationalism can liberate her from what she considers representative of upper-class society as "us." Besides, she possesses an irresistible desire for anywhere but "here," especially for the center as "there." Granted, she knows that "there are famines and riots and disasters," yet "those are local things after all— not like revolutions or anti-fascist wars, nothing that sets a political example to the world, nothing that's remembered," and therefore "local things" are nothing but "voiceless events in a backward world". In addition to such a spatial distinction between "here" and "there," she draws a temporal distinction, too. In the narrator's view, Ila seems to have always lived in the present alone. "For Ila," say he, "the current was the real: it was as though she lived in a present which was like an airlock in a canal, shut away from the tidewaters of the past and the future by steel floodgates". The observation reveals that she has assimilated herself into an arguable system of thought based on binary oppositions concerning time and place.

Geopolitically speaking, Ila can be considered as an Orientalist in the so-called Orient. In the following self-critical manner, Said refers to this particular aspect of Orientalism: "the geopolitical Orient solicited the West's attention, even as-by one of those paradoxes revealed so frequently by organized knowledge-East was East and West was West". The paradox he touches upon is what is signified by the cultural definition of hegemony. According to the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, hegemonic control is maintained not merely by threat, but by consent as well. It is then supposable that Ila's polarization of central/marginal is, in fact, what she has naturally acquired rather than what has forcibly required her. It seems, in other words, that she has consciously or unconsciously internalized the colonialist/imperialist's binary operations in order to release herself from "a backward world."

What is ironical is that the political activists with whom Ila shares her house in London "regard her as a kind of guest, a decoration almost" and "talk of her as 'our own upper-class Marxist''. Furthermore, the striking disharmony between her intellectuality and nativity is reinforced by the following irony: it is never brought to her knowledge that her future husband "Nick Price was ashamed to be seen by his friends, walking home with an Indian".

In what she centralizes as "there," she is thus forced to act as an Other. For this reason, she is in no way free from "here," nor does she gain her personal freedom; and Tha'mma insists that "Ila shouldn't be there" since "she doesn't belong there". Wherever she is, therefore, Ila remains a daughter of an Indian diplomat, whose vast wealth attracts Nick —an English Orientalist.

At a certain point in his early life, Nick announced that he wants to become like his grandfather Lionel Tresawsen, a self-made man who acquired his great wealth from "all around the world —Fiji, Bolivia, the Guinea Coast, Ceylon". In Capital Marx observes, "The exchange of commodities...first begins on the boundaries of...communities".

What he describes here is mercantilism as a way to make a profit on the intermediation between different markets or "communities." Marx would then see Tresawsen as a mercantilist who takes advantage of different value systems by locating himself "on the boundaries." It should be hastily noted, though, that Nick is a materialist as well as a mercantilist. Indeed, as stated above, the reason for his marriage lies simply in his desire for his wife's property. Initially, Nick was the narrator's blonde altar ego, but later the former was demystified by the latter, to whom his mentor had given "words to travel in" and "eyes to see them with".

When analyzed in this way, Ghosh's characters are all provided with their mirror-images. To name just a few: Tridib and the narrator as archaeologists; Ila and Tha'mma as polarists; Tresawsen and Nick as mercantilists; and Nick and Ila as Orientalists.

By making mutually reflexive one gender/generation and another, Ghosh exhibits what has remained in postcolonial India. The prefix "post-" is hence significant in the senses of "a break into a phase and consciousness of newly constructed independence and autonomy 'beyond' and 'after' colonialism" and "a continuation and intensification of the system, better understood as neo colonialism". It is plain that The Shadow Lines encompasses both meanings of the prefix, incorporating characters who are able and who are unable to break away from colonialism/imperialism. It is, after all, an ongoing narrative on postcoloniality. This study has conducted an analysis of Ghosh's postcolonial writing, employing a manner developed principally by Spivak. As has been pointed out, postcolonialism is associated with postmodernism in that postmodernity has laid up the foundations for postcoloniality. As a heterogeneous field of study, postcolonialism requires us to remain open to all possible perspectives generated between discourses — discourses "which cross each other, are sometimes juxtaposed with one another, but can just as well exclude or be unaware of each other".

If interdiscursivity cannot be achieved without recognizing "how knowledge is always open to further interpretation and criticism" and "how understanding is always susceptible to further correlation and realization", then postcoloniality is certainly no exception: its practitioners should always be conscious of knowledge's openness and understanding's susceptibleness. In an enclosed context of colonial/ imperial production, the subaltern can seldom or never speak. More often than not, as discussed previously, however, they can seldom or never speak even in an open-ended context of postcolonial production, either. The first and foremost task we are thus confronting is not to discontinue speaking of silence, whose cultural synonym is "consensus" and whose critical antonym is "controversy."

Always controversial, Spivak and Parry have reached little or no consensus, "but consensus for a research area as a whole is equivalent to stagnation, irrelevance, and death". If "consensus" means a state of knowing in "a research field as a whole," the researcher must then be in a state of not knowing in order to rescue the entire field from its "stagnation, irrelevance, and death." For the postmodern writer Donald Barthelme, to be in a state of not knowing is to be in an in-between space. In his essay "Not-Knowing," for example, he likens himself to an idiosyncratic player of banjulele —a cross between a banjo and a uke—in order to tells us how he, as an artist, will play a number like "Melancholy Baby": "I will play something that is parallel, in some sense, to 'Melancholy Baby" since "the interest of my construction, if any, is to be located in the space between the new entity I have constructed and the 'real' 'Melancholy Baby'.

Barthelme's example sounds quite playful, yet the importance should be attached to its meaningfulness rather than playfulness. The point of his is "to be located in the space between." The postcolonial practitioner is placed in a space between discourses, as the banjulele player is placed in a space between "the new entity" and the original "Melancholy Baby."

This analogy indicates that both the artist and the postcolonialist are expected "to attain a fresh mode of cognition." Given Barthelme's emphasis on art as "a meditation upon external reality," namely a vehicle for speaking of "the as-yet unspeakable, the as-yet unspoken" , his writings can readily be imagined as equivalent to his variations on "Melancholy Baby." Just like playing variations on "Melancholy Baby," he enjoys writing variations of "external reality." If the postmodernist pursues the possible by making lines among genres blurry, then the postcolonialist does so by making lines among discourses shadowy, thereby (re)discovering "the as-yet unspeakable, the as-yet unspoken." Is it high time to further expanding the universe of postcolonial discourse into an external universe of discourse?

7

Transcultural Communication in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

The Hungry Tide (2004)1 is the fifth novel and sixth substantial book by Amitav Ghosh. Born in Calcutta/Kolkata in 1956 and now resident in New York, Ghosh is by now established as one of the best-regarded of the "post-Rushdie" generation of expatriate Indians writing in English. If his first three novels revealed a writer experimenting with a diversity of forms and genres (magic realism and picaresque in *The Circle of Reason* (1986), impressionistic family history in *The Shadow Lines* (1988), and, in *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), a mélange of detection and science fiction), *The Glass Palace* (2000) marked an embrace of mainstream realism of an almost nineteenth-century type, manifested in the genre of the historical novel.

Ghosh's fiction has thus far exhibited a remarkable geographical spread, taking in, for *The Circle of Reason*, India, the Gulf region and Algeria; for *The Shadow Lines*, India, Bangladesh and the UK; for *The Calcutta Chromosome*, India and the US; and for *The Glass Palace*, Burma, India and Malaya. Generically, *The Hungry Tide* continues in the realist mode of *The Glass Palace*, this time with a contemporary setting plus historical flashbacks; geographically, its scope is more limited than that of Ghosh's other novels, as it homes in on the human and natural ecosystems of a small and highly particular area of India, though also taking account of the wider world through characters hailing from Delhi and the US.

Ghosh's narrative, rather than encompassing vast swathes of South and South-East Asia, here prefers, then, to focus a magnifying lens on what might be called a micro-culture within the region - namely, the Sundarbans or "tide country," the islets of the Ganges delta that lie south of Kolkata and just east of the West Bengal/Bangladesh frontier. The *Economist* reviewer took the view that "it is its sense of place that dominates the novel," and Ghosh himself might seem almost to vindicate such a view in his remark of 1998: "A novel ... must always be set somewhere: it must have its setting, and within the evolution of the narrative this setting must, classically, play a part almost as important as those of the characters themselves." That "almost" needs to be noted, however, and indeed *The Hungry Tide* highlights not only place but, crucially, dynamically evolving human relationships, in a context that includes - as in his other writings - the dimensions of work (he stated in 2002 that "even the most mundane forms of labour can embody an entire metaphysic"), crosscultural barriers and communication, and the relationship between past and present. History is, indeed, a recurring theme in Ghosh's writing, as acutely noted by the critic Brinda Bose (2001), who states: "Ghosh's fiction takes upon itself the responsibility of re-assessing its troubled antecedents, using history as a tool by which we can begin to make sense of - or at least come to terms with - our troubling present."

The story centres on two visitors to the Sundarban community, Kanai Dutt and Piyali Roy (Piya), and their interaction with that community and with each other. Kanai, a Delhi businessman in his forties, is a semi-outsider, paying a rare visit to his aunt Nilima, an NGO activist who runs a hospital on one of the islands; Piya, an Indo-American scientist from Seattle in her twenties, irrupts into the Sundarban world as - despite her Bengali origins – less a diasporic Indian than an outsider pure and simple, "the

American." Kanai is there to pick up and read a journal left him by his late uncle Nirmal, an idealistic, Marxist intellectual in the Bengali tradition, whose contents will oblige him to delve deep into his family history; Piya's journey to the tide country is part of her ongoing research on dolphins. Piya knows no Bengali ('"you know no Bangla?' … 'I was so little when I left India that I never had a chance to learn"' - 12). Her ignorance of her own language heritage induces her to take Kanai on board as interpreter between her and Fokir, the illiterate fisherman and protégé of Kanai's aunt who serves as her guide. Ghosh's novel takes as its task the exploration of a vast field of human communication, testing both its possibilities and its limits as the characters seek to cross multiple barriers - the barriers of language, religion and social class, those between human beings and nature, between traditional and cosmopolitan India, between urban and rural, between India and the wider world. The tension between global and local is articulated through the characters, with, for most of the novel, globalisation embodied by the Americanised Piya with her hitech GPS device, local identity symbolised by Fokir, and Kanai, the Delhi-resident, part-globalised modern entrepreneur, shifting uncertainly somewhere in between.

A central metaphor for the notion of communication in a hybrid world is provided by the theme of translation. Postcolonial or transcultural literature in general, and Indian Writing in English in particular, have frequently been viewed by critics via the concept of the already translated text. This position is explicated by the translation scholar Dora Sales Salvador (2004): "Las narrativas transculturales son ejemplos peculiares de autotraducción derivados del bilingüismo de sus autores. Son textos *originales* que en sí ya llevan la carga de la traducción, *ya* constituyen una traducción ..., motivan un replanteamiento de las nociones elementales del proceso traductor." ("Transcultural narratives are highly particular instances of self-translation arising from their authors' bilingual status. They are *original* texts which already bear the burden of translation, are already a translation ..., thus giving rise to a new questioning of the basic notions of the translation process.") Certainly, *The Hungry Tide* offers concrete evidence for such a textual model, as Kanai is shown across the novel cumulatively reading extracts from his uncle Nirmal's Sundarban journal: the extracts are "reproduced" in full and *in English*, but the reader is asked to imagine Kanai reading them *in Bengali*. An imputed transcultural shift is thus written into the very fabric of Ghosh's text.

Meanwhile and across the entire text, Ghosh's narrative, in what might be called, at least for the non-Bengali reader, a deliberate "foreignising" strategy, incorporates a large number of Bengali terms, mostly italicised on first occurrence and in some (but not all) cases glossed. The reader is thus left in no doubt as to the cultural provenance of the text, even despite the overarching role of English as its matricial language.

Significantly, Kanai himself is a translator/interpreter by profession: he knows six languages (his native Bengali plus Hindi, Urdu, Arabic, English and French - 199), runs a translation and interpretation agency, and offers to act as interpreter for Piya, who only knows English and has no means of communication with the local Bengali speakers whose knowledge and lore are vital for her research. Nirmal's written records are presented to the reader *translated* (from Bengali into English); Kanai *interprets* - mediates orally - between Piya and Fokir. The need for translation arises from the phenomenon of multilingualism in an interrelated world.

Multilingualism has always been a part of the Indian context, Ghosh himself is multilingual, and his earlier novels contain episodes reflecting a keen awareness of the complexities and difficulties of language interaction, both among Indians and between Indians and the wider world. Kanai interprets for Piya for a portion of her expedition, but a certain point he concludes she does not in fact need his services, apparently supposing she can communicate intuitively with her guide Fokir: "I think you'll be able to manage perfectly well without a translator." Piya has already shown an attitude to Fokir that supposes the two can communicate intuitively across the language and cultural divide that separates them: "And all that while, you couldn't understand a word he was saying, could you?' 'No' (...) 'but you know what? There was so much in common between us it didn't matter." What is involved here is an essentialist world-view, based on unexamined notions of a common humanity, that may seen as either enticingly utopian or dangerously naïve. At one point, Piya asks Kanai to explain the content of a traditional song that Fokir is chanting, asking him '"Can you translate?"', and Kanai replies: '" ... this is beyond my power ... the metre is too complicated.

I can't do it. Later, he writes Piya what is intended as a farewell letter in which he focuses on the impossibility of (adequate) translation/interpretation: "You asked me what Fokir was singing and I said I couldn't translate it: it was too difficult. And that was no more than the truth, for in those words there was a history that is not just his own but also of this place, the tide country.'' Rather than considering translation unnecessary, Kanai seems here to despair of it as impossible, because cultural barriers are too wide. Yet, paradoxically, in the moment of appearing to give up, he appends an approximate translation - rendered in verse presented as prose, in an act of generic hesitation that seems both to reflect and overcome Kanai's translator's doubts - of the Bengali folk poem that Piya had heard Fokir sing. Indeed, Kanai even ends his letter reclaiming the translator's place in the scheme of things, curiously echoing the polemical ideas of the translation theorist Lawrence Venuti, in first affirming the stock notion of the "good translator's" invisibility and then turning things round to demand his own visibility after all: "Such flaws as there are in my translation I do not regret, for perhaps they will prevent me from fading into sight as a good translator should: for once, I shall be glad if my imperfections render me visible." Against Piya's essentialist willingness to dispense with translation, then, Kanai stands as conscious of both its limitations and its necessity.

Technically, and certainly within professional contexts such as university schools of translation/interpretation or international organisations, translation refers *only* to the written word and interpretation *only* to the spoken word. The UN, the European Union and similar bodies employ *translators* and *interpreters* via separate recruitment procedures, in separate career paths with no horizontal mobility between them. However, it is rare for the lay person to grasp, let alone practise, this semantic distinction. Certainly, Amitav Ghosh does not, despite the interest that, as we have seen, he shows across his novels in the world of work and the technical details of occupations. The text of *The Hungry Tide* repeatedly employs "translate/translator" 'Do you know what your expedition lacks?' .... 'A translator!' ; 'Can you translate? to refer to the practice and practitioners of what is technically interpretation; the conceptual confusion is, be it added, shared in equal measure by Ghosh's reviewers. It is, though, also true that Kanai, working in the private sector and in contradistinction to the usual public-sector practice, does himself practise both activities: 'I'm a translator you see, and an interpreter as well, by profession.'

The very lexical hesitation between the terms "translator" and "interpreter", even if unjustifiable in strict technical and semantic terms, throws into relief the potentially ambivalent role of translation/interpretation - is the activity a transposition of meanings between cultural systems (translation), or is it, by its very nature, a rewriting and recoding of others' messages (interpretation)? Both translation and interpretation may theoretically be considered as forms of linguistic transfer, but it remains important not to occlude the dialectic of similarity and difference between the two activities.

Kanai's role as translator/interpreter is also significant in the sense that his work straddles the divide between the written (translation) and the oral (interpretation). This is of interest in the light of the wider interplay, or counterpoint, that operates across the text between written and oral modes. Kanai comes to terms with his past through a written text, his uncle's journal; Piya's scientific work relies on written reports and data sheets; Fokir is illiterate, and his illiteracy is a long-standing cause of tension between him and his upwardly mobile and literate wife, the nurse Moyna. As is frequent in Indian writing, in a country where an ancient heritage of written literature coexists with a rich oral tradition, Ghosh's novel, written text though it is, also invokes the popular storytelling tradition - with the inevitable references to the *Thousand and One Nights* (Nirmal in his journal compares himself to 'some misplaced, misgendered Scheherazade ... trying to stave off the night with a fleeting pen' - 148). The 'Nights' are, of course, a text which, though written, is based on older oral materials and which is structured around the act of storytelling, as, to save her life, the celebrated princess Scheherazade spins out tale after tale, many of them of Indian origin.

For the illiterate popular strata, the oral narrative tradition is crucial: thus, Nirmal's journal has a episode in which he converts material from a book he is reading into oral form to make it accessible to his villager companion Horen ('Saar, what is that you're reading? Are there any stories in it? Why not tell me too ...'. The novel's translation theme thus embraces not only conversion between languages (Bengali and English), but conversion between written and oral modes of the same language (Bengali). In addition, the tell-tale verb "Listen", signal of the storyteller, occurs, indeed, in Nirmal's journal - not only in the above episode with Horen ('All right, then ... Listen,') but also in a true story told by a fellow Bengali woman to Fokir's mother Kusum ("Listen, sister, we'll tell you: this is the story".)

The translation factor in the text is further complicated by a curious intertextual element, namely the recurrent quotations in Nirmal's journal from a work of Western literature originally written in not English but German - the *Duino Elegies*, the celebrated sequence of nine poems from 1923 by the Austrian Rainer Maria Rilke. The extracts from Rilke appear in a "real" English translation, but are imputedly quoted by Nirmal, and read by Kanai, in (for the Indian reader) the more domesticated form of a Bengali version. It is, furthermore, from one of Rilke's texts (the First Elegy) that Ghosh's own text quotes (within the journal) the crucial lines: "we're not comfortably at home/in our translated world", later to paraphrase the same lines as if from Kanai's viewpoint: "being so little at ease in your translated world". It is if, in the complex and multiple social universe bequeathed by colonialism and traversed by globalisation, even so basic a phenomenon as human communication has, more often than not, to be handled at one remove, indirectly, through a process of mediation that may also prove a distortion. Nonetheless, to translate is, necessarily, to communicate, however imperfectly, across human-made barriers.

The Hungry Tide is, like *The Glass Palace* before it, impeccably researched, and appears as an example of the novel as both history and ethnography. Ghosh's ethnographic qualifications (he has a doctorate in anthropology from Oxford University) are well-enough known and have been amply demonstrated in the pages of *In An Antique Land*; here, he delineates a series of cultural features of the tide country's micro-community - of its human ecosystem, placed in both complementary and conflictive relation to the natural ecosystem which it is Piya's task to explore. History, meanwhile, intervenes in the particular areas of utopia and class conflict.

The alternation between Kanai's here-and-now experiences and his reading of his uncle's journal brings past and present into a symbiotic encounter. The Bengali location allows Ghosh the immediate possibility of drawing on the particular utopian tradition of a part of the subcontinent where, over a good two centuries, Western rationalist influences have coalesced with an older vein of Indian syncretism to produce a unique strain of social thought, as expressed in the movement known as the Bengali Renaissance and notably manifested in the work of Rabindranath Tagore and his school and, later, university at Shantiniketan. This tradition is strongly present in Ghosh's earlier writing - in *The Circle of*

Reason, with its rationalist village school and cult of Pasteur, and in the fusion of western scientific endeavour with native esoteric thought in *The Calcutta Chromosome*.

Here in *The Hungry Tide*, it reappears in various forms, both exogenous and endogenous: in the utopian community founded in the Sundarbans at the beginning of the twentieth century by the visionary Scot Sir Daniel Hamilton ("Here there would be no Brahmins or Untouchables, no Bengalis and no Oriyas. Everybody would have to live and work together."; in Nilima's hospital and school, which despite her insistence on the need to temporise with government nonetheless offer the local community the hope of a better world; and in Nirmal's eminently Bengali brand of Marxism (after all, West Bengal, along with Kerala, has long been exceptional among Indian states in the continued institutional presence of the local communist party). It resurfaces, too, in Piya's doomed belief that she can somehow communicate seamlessly across cultural barriers with the illiterate Fokir.

The idea of utopia, as conceived by the visionary Hamilton and hankered after by Nirmal, always runs the risk of eliding the concrete historical realities of class. The vexed issue of social class barriers appears in Ghosh's novel twice over, across two generations - in the refugees' revolt of which Kusum is a part, and in the friendship (if that is the word) that develops across class lines between Fokir, her illiterate son, and the cosmopolitan outsider Piya. The failed popular revolt is, not surprisingly, a recurrent topos in postcolonial/transcultural/third-world writing: examples in Latin American literature include the salt rebellion of the indigenous women in José María Arguedas' *Los Ríos profundos* (1958) and the banana workers' strike in Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (1967), while in Indian literature Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938), with its Gandhian women villagers' insurrection, provides a classic exploration of the theme. In *The Hungry Tide*, Kanai reconstructs, via his uncle's journal, the revolt of a group of resettled refugees from the then East Pakistan, their creation of a short-lived community in the Sundarbans with visible utopian-rationalist features, and the bloody retaliation of the authorities. Kusum, Fokir's mother, is part of that revolt, and dies in the course of its repression.

The refugees' plight is in the first place the product of Partition, and therefore ultimately of British colonialism and its divide-and-rule strategies (Ghosh's novel thus connects with the dominant theme of his earlier *The Shadow Lines*). The refugee community is forcibly resettled by the Indian government in Madhya Pradesh state, hundreds of kilometres from Bengal, but in 1978 makes the collective decision to return "home" - if not to East Pakistan/Bangladesh, at least to West Bengal and the Sundarbans. Its members bed down on one of the islands – that on which Nilima's hospital stands - and begin to create the bases of an organised microsociety, and both Nirmal and Kusum find themselves drawn into the refugees' struggle.

Nirmal, in his journal, finds a strong utopian strand in their endeavour, in this attempt by the dispossessed to possess something of their own: "... there had been many additions, many improvements. Saltpans had been created, tubewells had been planned, water had been dammed for the rearing of fish ... It was an astonishing spectacle - as though an entire civilisation had sprouted suddenly in the mind." However, the utopia cannot and does not last: it is brutally repressed by the government forces (which recruit gangster elements for the purpose), and in its aftermath Kusum is killed, while Nirmal, whose journal ends at the moment of the repression, having got mixed-up in the events loses his sanity and dies soon after.

If Nirmal as a Marxist believed in a rapprochement across class barriers that could bring him and Kusum together on some level, a generation later Piya repeats this pattern with Kusum's son Fokir. As we have seen, Piya, it seems not feeling at home in a translated world and seeking one where translation is not necessary, naively believes she can do without Bengali/English interpretation in her interaction with Fokir. This attitude is at one with her imported, greenish view of the world: on witnessing an invading tiger set on fire by villagers, she is horrified and gets on a moral-absolutist high horse, rejecting such an act out of hand. At that point Piya, shocked at Fokir's approval of the killing of the tiger, admits to Kanai: '"Fact is, you were right and I was wrong ... about there being nothing in common between -?' 'You and Fokir' - 'Yes ..; You were right. I was just being stupid.'

At such a moment, Piya temporarily distances herself from her desire for a translation-free world. However, she soon reverts to type and accompanies Fokir, without Kanai there to interpret, on a fresh expedition which will soon be subsumed into all the rigours of a tide-country storm. And here indeed she and Fokir get as close as they ever will: the storm takes Fokir as he clasps Piya's body with his protective arms.

He, the illiterate villager, perishes; she, the privileged outsider, lives to tell the tale: "She tried to break free from his grasp, tried to pull him around so that for once, she could be the one who was sheltering him. But his body was unyielding, and she could not break free from it, especially now that it had the wind's weight behind it. Their bodies were so close, so finally merged that she would feel the impact of everything hitting him, she could sense the blows raining down on his back. She could feel the bones of his cheeks as if they had been superimposed upon her own: it was as if the storm had given them what life could not, it had fused them together and made them one.'

On one level, this denouement seems to call in question the utopian imperative and interrogate the possibility of transcending cultural barriers. If Fokir dies that Piya may live, if the storm makes them one only to disgorge Piya as sole survivor, then surely the privileged are still in their position. Nonetheless, if we now look at the novel's presentation of the Sundarbans' human ecosystem, a fresh utopian dynamic may be distinguished, in a conciliatory form of popular religious syncretism. This impulse manifests itself in the curious tale of Bon Bibi.

The cult of Bon Bibi, peculiar to the community in which Kanai finds himself, has been handed down through the generations, through the oral tradition of story and song: the tale, "told by Abdur-Rahim", appears to have been written down at one point, and at one point is staged as a theatre play, "The Glory of Bon Bibi", but its transmission remains essentially oral. It may fairly be seen as representative of a certain strand of Hindu-Muslim syncretism that runs through the byways, and sometimes even the highways, of Indian history.

The tide people are a priori Hindu, and have ended up in India rather than East Pakistan/Bangladesh, but that does not prevent them taking on substantial elements from the adjacent world of Islam. According to the story, two twins, Bon Bibi and her brother Shah Jongoli, were born in the holy city of Medina to a Sufi faqir. They are marked out for a special destiny: "When the twins came of age, the archangel [Gabriel] brought them word that they had been chosen for a divine mission: they were to travel from Arabia to the "country of eighteen tides" - *atthero bhatir desh* - in order to make it fit for human habitation. Thus charged, Bon Bibi and Shah Jongoli set off for the mangrove forests of Bengal dressed in the simple robes of Sufi mendicants." Bon Bibi becomes the tutelary deity of the islands.

Kusum sees the dolphins as her messengers; and Piya is amazed to find Fokir and his son praying at a shrine dedicated to her: "Piya recognised a refrain that occurred over and over again - it contained a word that sounded like 'Allah'. She had not thought to speculate about Fokir's religion, but it occurred to her now that he might be Muslim. But no sooner had she thought this, than it struck her that a Muslim was hardly likely to pray to an image like this one. What Fokir was performing looked very much like her mother's Hindu *pujas* – and yet the words seemed to suggest otherwise." The strange coexistence of the name of Allah with puja-type gestures points to a transcultural fusion of elements from both Hinduism and Islam, at the opposite pole from the

Hindu-Muslim confrontations that have too often disfigured the post-Raj subcontinent.

Syncretist phenomena such as this may be viewed as part and parcel of the islands' human ecosystem (the ethnologist in Ghosh also notes that the observance of widowhood in the Sundarbans differs from the usual Hindu norm: "here, on the margins of the Hindu world, widows were not condemned to lifelong bereavement: they were free to remarry if they could"). That human ecosystem is, of course, inserted problematically into a wider natural ecosystem - or eco-polysystem. The migratory dolphins have their own logic, while that of the tigers and crocodiles, if part of a greater natural whole, is not in any immediate sense compatible with that of the human community those animals prey on: to that, Kanai can vouch when he escapes as if miraculously from a tiger's clutches. No less unkind is the logic of the horrendous storm that kills Fokir and almost sweeps away Piya too. Piya, true to type, tends to sentimentalise the animal world and its imagined beneficent relation to humanity, asking herself when a group of dolphins seem to be consciously sharing a catch of fish with their human acquaintances: "Did there exist any more remarkable instance of symbiosis between human beings and a population of wild animals?", but is later sharply taken to task by the tiger-burning episode and the awkward questions it raises. Across the novel as a whole, and despite the attractive notion of idealising cetacean communities, the general sense is that the basic humanity/nature relationship in the Sundarbans remains highly problematic (death and destruction, from storms or tigers, can face the villagers at any moment) and is not susceptible to facile ideological simplifications.

Neither human nor natural ecosystem in Ghosh's novel appears easy to place or interpret. Here, though, the reader may recall that a novel is not only a narrated tale but a construct within a wider literary system, and at this point the notion of intertextuality may come to our aid. *The Glass Palace* already exhibited a significant intertextual element, recalling and rewriting images and themes from Rudyard Kipling and George Orwell, and this novel too finds Ghosh the writer taking on certain of his distinguished precursors. To take the Bon Bibi, Hindu-Muslim element first, it is possible to hypothesise a curious dialogic encounter, implicit in the text, between Amitav Ghosh and one of his most celebrated "Indo-Anglian" peers, Salman Rushdie. There are, in fact, a number of interesting convergences between *The Hungry Tide* and Rushdie's work.

Rushdie has himself briefly featured the tide country in his own fiction, in a chapter of *Midnight's Children* (1981), indeed entitled "In the Sundarbans", in which his narrator Saleem, in the wake of the Bangladesh war, finds himself lost in a dark, sinister and rather Kiplingesque jungle world, "through incomprehensibly labyrinthine salt-water channels overtowered by the cathedral-arching trees" (Ghosh, one may speculate, may in part be motivated by the desire to make comprehensible what Rushdie treats as "incomprehensible"); in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999) Rushdie too quotes Rilke (the *Sonnets to Orpheus*), in the epigraph and intermittently across the text; and in *Shame* (1983), the narrator, who may approximately be identified with Rushdie himself, anticipates Ghosh's notion, via Rilke, of a "translated world" by referring to himself, formed by the life-experiences of more than one culture, as a "translated man." The most significant case of intertextuality with Rushdie, however, relates to no less a text than that writer's famously controversial novel of 1988, *The Satanic Verses*.

Bon Bibi and her brother are born in Medina, "one of the holiest places in Islam" (103), and, indeed, one of the two holy cities in what is now Saudi Arabia; Rushdie's novel locates its two controversial chapters in a place named Jahilia, a thinly disguised version of the other holy city, Mecca. Ghosh's twins are fathered "through the intervention of the archangel Gabriel", a figure who later instructs them to go to India and who also appears in Rushdie's ironic rewriting of the dictation of the Koran to the Prophet, in the demented dreams of his filmstar namesake Gibreel Farishta ("Gibreel, hovering-watching from his highest camera angle.")

The twins' crossing from Arabia to India, too, parallels in reverse the "crossing of the Arabia Sea" delusion from the Ayesha episode, another of Gibreel's dreams in *The Satanic Verses*. It needs to be stressed, however, that where Rushdie's text, intentionally not, ended up stoking the fires of religious controversy, Ghosh's rewriting of themes from *The Satanic Verses* works in the direction of syncretism and, therefore, intercommunal understanding: it is as if Ghosh, via his mentor Rushdie, had been through the confrontational, hardline secularist attitude to religion, and come out on the other side with the objective of finding common areas between the subcontinent's two largest faiths - a dynamic of rapprochement that is movingly symbolised in the image of Fokir and his son worshipping Bon Bibi in a ceremony that is, at one and the same time, both Sufi and Hindu.

On the vexed plane of the humanity/nature relationship, Ghosh's intertextual practice appears to play a similar role: We are certainly dealing with an important theme in the novel, for Ghosh himself has declared in a 2004 interview: "I wanted to write a book that is grounded in nature." Here, *The Hungry Tide* matches itself against not an Indian text but one from Piya's adopted America - Herman Melville's famous maritime epic of 1851, *Moby-Dick*. When Piya pronounces the term "cetologist" before Kanai, in explanation of her work ("'I'm a cetologist. That means ...' (...) 'You don't need to explain. It means you study marine mammals'" - 11), the reader familiar with the Anglo-American literary canon will immediately think of Melville's whale of a novel, which not only holds vast amounts of marine-mammal lore in its belly, but actually entitles its thirty-second chapter "Cetology." The analogy is confirmed later in Ghosh's text, when Kanai declares to Piya, 'I thought you were going to lead me to my Moby Dick.'

However, where Melville's novel pits man against whale, Piya's research, focusing not on whales but dolphins, aims not to kill cetaceans but to understand them, and, as we have seen, has a strong - if at times naïve - utopian element. If Ahab is driven by the will to power ('Oh, his unappeasable brow drives on towards one, whose duty tells him he cannot depart') Piya seems to embody the will to knowledge (as Kanai puts it: "You go through a lot for these creatures": her desire is, metaphorically at least, to dive into the depths of the dolphin world and return with scientific treasures, in a quest which she would certainly see as non-exploitative towards the natural environment. It is as if Ghosh were reversing Melville by seeking in his text the essence of a non-confrontational, cooperative relationship between humanity and nature. In the Sundarban world, such a relationship can - the crouching tiger reminds the reader - be sketched only in embryo.

Nonetheless, it may still be argued that through Piya Ghosh is edging his readership away from Melville's heroic-confrontational mode, centred on the nineteenth-century Western notion of the mastery of nature, towards a different kind of human insertion into the natural world - where, as Walter Benjamin put it in 1926, what matters is "not the mastery of nature but of the relation between nature and man". The intertextuality of *The Hungry Tide*, in ambivalent dialogue with both Melville and Rushdie, seems to be pointing away from heroic-male literary models, be it for crosscultural or for culture/nature relations, and towards less polarised and more dialogic frames of being.

For all the above conciliatory trends in its writing, Ghosh's narrative nonetheless, as we know, climaxes harshly in the dark and tragic death of Fokir in the storm. With such a denouement, it may, somehow, fairly be asked whether Kanai was not right, and whether Piya's notion of a seamless communication beyond words with Fokir was not, at bottom, an impossible reverie born of a naively idealist world-view. Their relationship in fact goes as far as it could and no further: the moving image of the dying Fokir with his body protectively surrounding Piya's, yet calling out for his wife and child in his last moments, serves to establish the outer limits of their communication. On the one hand, Ghosh eschews all sensationalism: as a visual image, the Fokir-Piya pair, apparently transcending the barriers of class and literacy, might remind some readers of another male-female dyad, Velutha and Ammu in Arundhati Roy's bestselling novel set in Kerala, *The God of Small Things* (1997) and their doomed, cross-caste love affair, but Roy's unlikely pair perpetrate a transgression which Ghosh's narrative carefully falls short of. Piya does not take her relationship with Fokir beyond the culturally permissible limits. On the other hand, though, those same limits serve to point up the difficulty of communication too.

The monolingual Piya, knowing neither Bengali nor Hindi, appears, despite her Indian origins, as typifying the monoglot attitudes of the Anglo-Saxon world in general and the US in particular. Those who only know English are doomed not to understand other cultures, unless they draw on the services of a translator-interpreter and cultural mediator like Kanai - services which, however flawed and imperfect, prove indeed to be necessary, in the very context of the globalisation that brings the likes of Piya to locations like the Sundarbans.

Despite this, the novel's conclusion, though open-ended, paradoxically seems to find Ghosh - and, in all probability, the reader - moving tentatively towards an admission of the possibility, after all, of communication across cultural barriers, at least within certain limits and subject to a rational effort of will. At the end, both Piya and Kanai voluntarily undertake a reconstruction (and reinterpretation) of their experiences in the Sundarbans: each has lost the textual evidence (the sea claimed both Kanai's uncle's journal and Piya's cetological datasheets), but each is willing to piece the text back together from memory.

Beyond this, both actually, and surprisingly, return to the Sundarbans: Kanai shifts his residence from Delhi to Kolkata to be near the tide country and visit often, thus moving at least halfway, towards a neo-Gandhian renunciation of cosmopolitan and metropolitan India in favour of the more demotic claims of what some call the "real India" (in a evolution that might recall the nativist conversion of the English Teacher in R.K. Narayan's novel of that name of 1945). Piya goes further, electing to base herself and her research in the Sundarbans themselves and to learn Bengali, giving a surprising preference to the local over the global, to her Indian roots over her globalised-American identity. A madeover, Bengali-speaking Piya could indeed have greater possibilities of communicating cross-culturally with the likes of Fokir than the "American" whom the reader has accompanied across the book. Meanwhile, whether the future will hold any convergence of a more affective nature between Piya and Kanai is left open, but clearly their paths will cross once more.

It is as if the diverse strands of Ghosh's narrative have finally come together. In his earlier work, Amitav Ghosh employed the metaphor of weaving - the spinning of yarns, in more than one sense - as symbol for the connective role of writing and of human communication in general. In *The Circle of Reason*, weaving - the activity of the main character, Alu – appears as an emblem of connection, even being linked to the development of computers, and the text offers the pregnant aphorism: "Weaving is hope because it has no country, no continent", while the pages of *In An Antique Land* contain the image of the weaver as storyteller: "Later, when I got to know (the weaver) Zaghloul better, I discovered that besides being very fond of stories, he had a manner of telling them that was marvellously faithful to the metaphorical resonances of his chosen craft.".

However, in both texts the weaving image seemed more a matter of unrealised potential: in *The Circle of Reason* Alu's creative gift finally leads him nowhere, while the Indo-Egyptian encounter of *In An Antique Land* runs up against cultural differences that at times appear unbridgeable. By contrast, the narrative of *The Hungry Tide* is made up of interwoven strands - Kanai's narrative and Piya's, the present lived by the characters and the past of Nirmal's journal - that variously alternate, converge, diverge and reconverge. As the novel comes to an end, the utopian possibility opens up of a comingtogether of all the book's narrative and conceptual strands: global and local, urban and rural, linguistic and scientific, anglophone and Bengali-speaking - even, it may be, male and female.

The hungry tide has claimed its sacrificial victim in Fokir, but Piya plans a memorial to him and even begins to speak of the Sundarbans as "home". The utopian goal of mutual understanding, implicit in this novel's recurrent theme of translation, begins to appear as something actually possible. As both Piya and Kanai seem to morph into a new kind of cosmopolitan who can actually feel at home in a place like the tide country, the reader finds this latest of Amitav Ghosh's fictions opening up new and unexpected perspectives: the postcolonial text, product and reflection of a translated world, nonetheless proclaims the need and the desire, for us as global citizens, to communicate in new forms - to think transculturally, and to build new bridges across that world.

8

Deconstructing Human Society: An Appreciation of Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies

Amitav Ghosh and His Inventiveness

Amitav Ghosh is a writer concerned with India's place in larger international cultural networks, whose fiction seems directly informed by contemporary academic debates about colonialism and culture. His very first novel, *Circle of Reason* (1986) written in Salman Rushdie's magical realist mode, attempts to recover a continuing tradition of cultural exchange for India.

Ghosh is a novelist given to generic inventiveness and champion of post-modern cultural weightlessness, but his writing is as interested in the ties that bind as in the transitory nature of global culture. In fact Amitav Ghosh has, over the last two decades, brought substance and range to Indian English fiction and indeed, added richly to the literature of the subcontinent as a whole.

If Rushdie can be said to have revitalized the Indian novel in English with the 1981 publication of the magnificent *Midnight's Children*, Amitav Ghosh's fiction has over the years, probed its unlit corners, and brought it into powerful dialogue with other places, peoples and times. Ghosh has chosen to set new literary challenges for himself, constantly transforming his work over the years.

Amitav Ghosh's Writing Career

Ghosh's career did begin, like that of many of his contemporaries, including Shashi Tharoor and Mukul Kesavan, in the experimental wake of *Midnight's Children* and the techniques it put into play: magical realism, satire, wordplay, mythology, elaborate allegories, and layers of interconnected stories. His debut novel *Circle of Reason* draws on these resources and opened up a rich seam of stories and themes that Ghosh would excavate in later works. From happenings in the physical world, some probably prosaic, such as teak-felling, rubber-tapping, opium production, dolphin migration, sari-weaving and even the anopheles mosquito bearing deadly malaria, Ghosh's writing draws out poetry, insight and wondrous histories.

Amitav Ghosh has a distinctive style of writing that synthesizes the imagination of a writer with the insightful detaining of an anthropologist. He takes up the obscured events in history and transcends the boundaries of fiction/ non-fiction by sprinkling over them the colors of his imagination. One of the recurring themes in Ghosh's work exposes the fact that despite the relative newness of capitalism and the violence of the imperialism that put it in place, globalization in the sense of trade, migration and cultural contact is not itself new. Although European colonialism would constitute a great rupture in the histories of Asia and Africa, out of these often tragic upheavals communities were unmade but also made again.

Sea of Poppies

Sea of Poppies, the first in a trilogy, has been received favorably by the Booker jury for the compelling story told against an epic historical canvas, its deft use of diverse tongues and a memorable cast of characters.

Sea of Poppies tells the story of how it is that in the ship Ibis, headed to Caribbean sugar plantations; small new worlds are forged, bringing together north Indian women, Bengali *Zamindars*, black men, rural laborers and Chinese seamen. It is the story of people whose fate is written by poppy flower, the British who forced opium cultivation on farmers, the ruined lives of farmers, the people who were addicted and the poor factory workers, deceit of the British, ship that transported the opium and which carried Indians to a life of slavery.

The Background

Sea of Poppies is set in India in 1838. The East India Company, yet to be curbed of it excesses by the British Crown, is amassing unimaginable wealth by growing opium and illegally exporting it to China. Peasant farmers have been obliged to turn over their fields to opium production, and this causes widespread poverty and hunger because lands that had once provided sustenance were now swamped with the rising tide of poppies. Furthermore, the Chinese are determined to stop a trade that is rapidly undermining the economy by turning millions of them into addicts. As the Chinese stood up in their defense and banned the import of opium, the Company took its revenge by declaring war on China under the rhetoric of freedom. While Chinese were being poisoned under the guise of triangular trade of opium in the mid 19th century, the poor Indian peasant actually suffered the burnt of this poisoning. The English *'sahibs'* forced everyone to grow poppy in place of useful crops like wheat, *dal* and vegetables.

Amitav Ghosh aptly captures the sheer helplessness of Indian laborers and peasants as the factory's growing appetite for revenue rendered them exploited and defenseless. *Sea of Poppies* traverses the least treaded path of Indian colonial history by exposing the shrewd business acumen of British, who scrapped India of its riches and Chinese of their discretion by poisoning them with opium.

Sea of Poppies Resembles Calcutta!

A large cast of characters in *Sea of Poppies* assembles in Calcutta, teeming city in which numerous races and people of differing faiths and creeds live together. The Ibis, a former slave ship, is being refitted to take a large group of *girmitiyas* or indentured migrants to Mauritius (Islands of Mareech).

The Ibis, the Slave Ship

The Ibis has a British captain, an American, second mate, Indian troops to maintain order, and a crew of lascars. Among its passengers are people of all nationalities, backgrounds and beliefs, some crossing the seas to escape difficulties at home, some being transported as convicts. They belong to different strata of society ranging from a widowed village woman *Deeti*, a low caste giant of a man' *Kalwa*, the gomusta Baboo Nob Kissin Pander, a mulatto American freedman Zachery, an orphaned French girl, Paulette, her play mate Jodu and the bankrupt Raja Neel Rattan of Raskhali. As they sail down the Hooghly and into the Indian Ocean, their old familial ties are washed away and they begin their lives afresh. The sea becomes their new nation as the shipmates form new bonds of empathy. They leave behind the strictures of caste, community and religion; rename themselves as *jahaz-bhais* and *jahaz-bahens*.

A Positive Note Amidst All Suffering

Even amidst such sufferings, Ghosh sound a positive note as he shows how despite all odds, life somehow finds a way. Singing and ritualistic performances become their sole refuse from the colonial reality and the uncertainties awaiting them in the remote islands of Mareech.

In fact, through *Sea of Poppies*, we can compare the vexed diasporic experiences of colonial India with that of an equally perturbed colonial history of Africa and the numbing diasporic experiences of Africans as poignantly encapsulated in Walcott's poems. The dilemma faced by *jahaz-bhais* of the Ibis, while crossing the chasm of darkness where the holy Ganga disappeared into the *kalapani*' is aptly portrayed in the following lines of Walcott's poem ' *Names*' (1970):

> Behind us all, the sky folded as history folds over a fish line, and the foam foreclosed to trace our names the sand which the sea erased again, to our indifference.

Polyglot Communities – Indian Panorama in the Ibis

Both Calcutta and Ibis are polyglot communities; the people on this ship speak everything from pidgin and Bhojpuri to the comically mangled English of a Bengali Babu and a young Frenchwoman. To do this, Ghosh has perused not only Sir Henry Yule's Hobson-Jobson, the celebrated 19th century dictionary of colloquial Anglo-Indian words and phrases, but also more obscure 1811 English and Hindustani Naval dictionary of technical terms and sea phrases.

Incessant Movements and Community Building

Sea of Poppies, the first volume in Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy, revisits some of the concerns of his earlier novels. Among these are the incessant movements of the peoples, commerce, and empires which have traversed the Indian ocean since antiquity; and the lives of men and women with little power, whose stories, framed against the grand narratives of history, invite other ways of thinking about the past, culture and identity. On the Ibis community of sorts begins to form among the migrants. Relationships are forged or break up, hostilities erupt, and individual destinies undergo sudden changes of direction.

Cut off from their roots, in transit, and looking ahead to fresh start, the migrants are prone to invent new names and histories. All have stories to tell and secrets to hide. The controlling theme running across the novel is the question of identity.

Eastern Humanism?

Amitav Ghosh, as always, proposes a very particular, non-western form of humanism, a belief in commonalities that exist across race, class and culture. Political imperatives determine many of the relationships in the novel, but for the mot part fail to quench the force of individual human emotions-memories and desires, disappointment and aspirations. Ghosh's success as historical novelist owes much to the distinctiveness of each of his characters. These are underpinned by a mass of researches, specialist information, which brings a bygone era and vanished experiences to life through vividly realized detail. We get taxonomy of the various types of opium and their effects, an account of what life in both mid-19th century Calcutta and its hinterland might have been like.

Globalizing Opium Trade

Sea of Poppies dramatizes two great economic themes of the 19th century: the cultivation of opium as a cash crop in Bengal and Bihar for the Chinese market, and the transport of Indian indentured workers to cut sugar canes for the British on such islands as Mauritius, Fiji and Trinidad. Caught up in this war of opium is the central character Deeti, who discovers the power of opium when she begins to use it to sedate her troublesome mother-in-law:

> The more she administered the drug, the more she came to respect its potency: how frail a creature was a human being, to be tamed by such tiny doses of this substance! She saw now why the factory in Ghazipur was so diligently patrolled by the *sahibs* and their *sepoys* for if a little bit of this gum could give her such power over the life, the character, the very soul of this elderly woman, then with more of it at her disposal, why should she not be able to seize kingdoms and control multitudes?

Controlling Milling Multitudes

Controlling multitudes is at the heart of this novel: Zachary Reid, American sailor, takes a job on board the ship. Benjamin Burnham, the new owner of the Ibis has no time for progressive ideas which stand in the way of his own progress. The Chinese are trying to stop the trade of opium into their country, so Burnham says, till then, this vessel is going to do just the kind of work she was intended for: Zachary, surprised at this suggestion, says Do you mean use her as a slaver ship, sir? But have not your English laws outlawed that trade?. That is true, Mr. Burnham nodded, yes, indeed they have, Reid. It is sad but true that there are many who will stop at nothing to halt the march of human freedom. Freedom, sir? said Zachary, wondering if he had misheard. Freedom, yes, exactly, said Mr. Burnham. Is not that what the mastery of the white man means for the lesser races?.

The Past in the Present

Sea of Poppies delineates, how history, and in particular, colonial history in Asia, affects lives today, how the present is shaped by that era. Ghosh subtly explains the role that colonial powers played in the opium trade, and how under the rubric of the East India Company, Britain was a nation-state drug dealer, and India became her poppy field. In fact *Sea of Poppies* is set in an era of agricultural scandal: burgeoning western demand for profitable but inedible crops is causing starvation in the subaltern world.

It opens in a remote village devastated by these circumstances. Deeti, watches her inert husband yield to addiction; he collapses at the opium-packing factory where glazed workers move as slow as ants in honey. She has a small plot of land, but its poppies will not feed her and nor will the proceeds of their sale. After she is widowed, *Sati* seems the most appealing option. People like Deeti are displaced by the company, come together to form an unnamed association on ibis. Describing Ibis, Baboon Nob Kissin, one of the characters in the novel says, the Ibis was not a ship like any other; in her inward reality she was a vehicle of transformation, traveling through the mists of illusion towards the elusive, ever-receding land that was truth.

In a time of colonial upheaval, fate has thrown together a diverse cast of Indians and Westerners. An unlikely dynasty is born, which will span continents, races and generations.

The vast sweep of this historical adventure embraces the lush poppy fields of the Ganges, the rolling high seas and the crowded backstreets of Canton. It is the panorama of characters, whose Diaspora encapsulates the vexed colonial history of the east itself, that makes *Sea of Poppies* so alive. Fate is the central theme of *Sea of Poppies*; Ghosh shows us that while the migrants are cut off from families and their caste system, the intrepid voyage also offers a chance of new lives and beginnings.

Pun and Sorrow

Amitav Ghosh has beautifully juxtaposed pun with sorrow ness of the plot. When the ibis anchors for one last night in Indian waters, Ghosh describes this:

The last place from which the migrants would be able to view their native shore: this was Saugor Roads, a much trafficked anchorage in the lee of Ganga-Sagar, the island that stands between the sea and the holy river. The very name Ganga-Sagar, joining, as it did river and sea, clear and dark, known and hidden, served to remind the migrants of the yawning chasm ahead'.

When the Ibis, leaves Calcutta and sets out across the Bay of Bengal, carrying indentured migrants, many of whom will become the equivalent of slaves, the seas darken and become stormy. As the ship tosses and conditions deteriorate, the ship soon becomes a microcosm for life on land, full of tumult and unexpected twists of fate, and each person's heart is laid bare.

Everybody aboard is escaping from something, so anxious to put their problems behind them that they see no choice but to submit to the atrocious living conditions and sometimes sadistic overseers aboard the *Ibis*.

Life aboard the ship is as stratified and as subject to both cruelty and courage as the occupants have experienced on land, but as the ship heads for new ports in foreign lands, its occupants still see it as the only possible escape from their past and its problems.

Opium War and *Sea of Poppies* – Myriad Participants

Set in India in 1838, at the outset of the three-year Opium War between the British and the Chinese, this epic novel follows several characters from different levels of society, who become united through their personal lives aboard the ship and, more generally, through their connections to the opium and slave trades. Deeti Singh married as a young teenager to a man whose dependence on opium makes him an inadequate husband and provider, is forced to work on the family's opium field outside Ghazipur by herself, though she fears her sadistic brother-in-law. When she has no options left that make sense to her, she escapes, eventually joining the migrants aboard the *Ibis*.

The *Ibis*, owned by Burnham Brothers, carries as one of its mates a young sailor from Baltimore, Zachary Reid, who has left America because his status as an octoroon has led to constant harassment by other American sailors. These two characters, Deeti and Reid, see life as it is, recognizing all its cruelty but also seeing its potential, and their clear-eyed observations of life around them vividly convey their cultures and the roles open to them. At the opposite end of the scale from Deeti and Reid, is Benjamin Burnham, who owns the *Ibis* and engages in the opium trade, which his family controls in Ghazipur, fifty miles east of Benares. Since the slave trade has been officially ended, Burnham has kept the *Ibis* intact and simply switched to the transport of exiled prisoners and coolies.

Though Burnham is the son of a Liverpool tradesman, his willingness to finance and manage these exploitative trades has led to enormous wealth and a lavish lifestyle impossible for him in England. Among his acquaintances is Raja Neel Rattan Halder, the Zemindar of Raskali, whose life epitomizes the unimaginable opulence that upper caste Brahmins assume, is their right by birth.

Never questioning his high caste existence, Neel has paid little attention to his dwindling resources, and he has now accumulated debts.

Ghosh, Master Craftsman

Ghosh depicts the lives of these characters and their acquaintances in extravagant and thoroughly researched detail, bringing to life Deeti's misery, the expectations for her within her husband's family, the customs which she must honor, and the life which her six-year-old daughter must expect (including marriage within three or four years). Zachary Reid, aboard the *Ibis*, becomes the protégé of Serang Ali, the leader of the lascars, those native seamen who perform the hard manual labor aboard ships. Though Reid's own background is not so different from that of the lascars, he is a foreigner, a man who has no known caste within Indian society, and Serang Ali treats him as a superior to the lascars, all of whom are either low-caste or caste-less. With the support of the lascars and Serang Ali, Zachary Reid has the potential to progress to officer status, something impossible for him at home, and as he shares his thoughts about his own life, he is also commenting on the human condition in general.

The first book in a projected *Ibis* trilogy,. this historical novel pulses with life, filled with details of everyday existence and the cultures of the characters, which make the actions of its characters understandable. A monument to the desire for a better life and the willingness of people to take chances in order to attain it, the novel is also a vibrant and textured depiction of the historical moment—at the time when China declared it would prohibit the importation of opium, which was decimating its addicted citizens. British traders, who had been forcing Indian laborers to turn over their fields to the growing of poppies, were willing to declare war to save their profits, despite the fact that the British government did not know that the traders were about to declare war.

Linguistic Diversity

As the story progresses, we also meet a cross-section of Europeans who have been living or trading in India for decades, and who now speak a highly diluted form of English that incorporates Hindi or Bengali words. Ghosh simply presents their speech as it is, without italicizing the Indian bits or providing a glossary at the end (something that is frequently done – and overdone – in Indian novels written in English). Further, he spells the local words not as an Indian reader would recognize them but to reflect the European accents with which they are spoken. The result is that even for a reader who knows the words and their meanings, some of these passages require constant interpretation or trapolation.

As illustration, here's a short list of some of these words and phrases in the form that they appear in the book (spelt according to the foreign pronunciation). In parentheses, we have included the spellings that an Indian reader would be more familiar with.

> Zubben. (*zubaan),* Chawbuck. (*chabuk*), Pollock-sawg. (*paalak-saag*) for spinach dishes, Chitty and dawk (for *chithi* and *daak*, or letter and postbox), Shishmull (*sheesh mahal*, mirror palace), Dufter. (*daftar*, office), Balty. (*baalti*, bucket), Hurremzads. (*haraamzadas*, bastards), Jildee. (*jaldi*, quick), Chupowing. (from *chupna* or hide), Gantas (bells) in a clock-tower., Tuncaw. (*tankha*, salary), Tumasher. (*tamasha*, fuss, used here to mean a large celebration), Oolter-poolter. (*ulta-pulta* orupside-down), Quoddie. (*qaidi*,prisoner), Bawhawdery. (*bahaduri*, courage), Coorsy. (*kursi*, chair) and kubber. (*khabbar*, news), later kibber. is used instead of kubber..

Colonial Expressions and English

Birth of Indian English

In this context, some of the most entertaining passages are the conversations between Mrs. Burnham, and an orphan named Paulette, who has been living under her care in their Calcutta mansion. In Mrs Burham's manner of talking, we get the full measure of how deeply the local language has altered the speech patterns of the Europeans who have been living here for years or decades. She says things like, Don't you samjo, Paulette?. And Where have you been chupowing yourself? I've been looking everywhere for you.. On one occasion she asks Paulette if little chinties had got into her clothes. On another, explaining that Paulette is lucky to have received a proposal of marriage from a judge, she says:

> I can tell you, dear, there's a paltan of mems who'd give their last anna to be in your jooties...you're lucky to have a judge in your sights and you mustn't let your bunduk waver.

And when she mistakenly thinks that Paulette is with child, the phrase she uses is a local variation of bun in the oven.: There isn't a *rootie in the choola*, is there? Naturally, names undergo changes as well: one of the principal characters, Babu Nobokrishno Panda, likes being addressed by the Anglicized version of his name, Nob Kissin Pander or Nob Kissin Baboo.

In another novel, some of this might have become tiresome after some time, or begun to seem affected. But it's very appropriate to Ghosh's book, which is after all a panorama of different cultures, attitudes and belief systems colliding with each other, or at least circling suspiciously around each other – more than a century and a half ago, when concepts like globalization didn't exist in the sense that we understand them today, and the world was still a very large and frightening place.

A Mammoth Work

Sea of Poppies is laced with political overtones, revealing the hypocritical and dangerous mindset of the then Englishmen, who compelled the natives to the level of subaltern in their own land. On the societal level, the message conveyed by the novel is enormous the *girmityas'* who gather on the Ibis leave behind their identities in terms of caste, religion etc and adopt a new identity of oppressed; a new community takes birth. Amitav Ghosh takes a dig at the Englishmen's attitude towards religion, when one of the characters in the novel says, Trade is Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ is trade. It is a mammoth work by Amitav Ghosh, juxtaposing historical evolution of Indian society with the contemporary nuances of Indian polity. It is an apt commentary on colonialism, which though has harmed Indian society but it has brighter side too.

Colonialism has culturally and linguistically amalgamated Indian ethos with the European sensibilities; on social level there was a synthesis of societies. In fact it is a commentary on socio-cultural evolution of Indian subaltern society. It is a saga of struggle by the have-nots of colonial India. Amitav Ghosh has ventured into one of the ugly areas of Indian history. By doing so, Ghosh exposes the modern reader to the colonial past of Indian society. This relocation to their past is nothing but reclaiming what is indispensable to our existence.

Amitav Ghosh's work like that of other major sub continental writers-Tagore, Premchand, Senapati, Chughtai- is imbued by a deep commitment to humane values. In a world so palpably ravaged by greed and intolerance, this literature is surely no luxury but a necessary reclamation of all that in our heterogeneous culture is valuable, possible and, ultimately, utterly indispensable.

As *Sea of Poppies* comes to a satisfying close, Ghosh leaves several doors open suggesting the direction he will take with this novel's sequel, which will undoubtedly continue into the Opium War itself with many of the same characters. On the short list of nominations for the Man Booker Prize for 2008, this rich and exciting historical epic has something for everyone.

9

Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies and Salman Rushdie's The Enchantress of Florence

In a time of colonial upheaval, fate has thrown together a truly diverse cast of Indians and Westerners, from a bankrupt Raja to a widowed villager, from an evangelical English opium trader to a mulatto American freedman. As their old family ties are washed away they, like their historical counterparts, come to view themselves as jahaj-bhais or ship-brothers. An unlikely dynasty is born, which will span continents, races and generations.

It is this panorama of characters, whose diaspora encapsulates the vexed colonial history of the East itself, which makes *Sea of Poppies* so alive – as written by one of the world's finest novelists.

How does Amitav Ghosh use language to obscure and reveal identities?

Sea of Poppies is a book of strict social rules and hierarchies – in the villages, in the palace, in the prison, in the grand houses and onboard ship. Why is this? Who makes the rules? Who do they benefit? Who/what challenges them?

Would you describe *Sea of Poppies* as an 'epic' novel? If so, what epic qualities does it display?

Amitav Ghosh uses a mingling of languages such as Anglo-Indian transliterations, pidgins and slangs, what impact does this have on the reader?

Sea of Poppies is a projected trilogy, what direction can you see (or would you like to see) the second volume taking?

By a curious synchronicity, two heavyweights of Indian Writing in English, Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh, have, in the first half of 2008, published historical novels almost simultaneously. In addition, both novels were longlisted for the 2008 Booker Prize (an award which Rushdie's own *Midnight's Children* has effectively won three times over, having been voted "Booker of Bookers" for the prize's 25th and then for its 40th anniversary), and Ghosh, though not Rushdie, then made it as far as the shortlist, the prize being won in fact by another Indian, Aravind Adiga with *The White Tiger*. Comparison, then, invites itself: while my personal opinion is that Ghosh's historical vision impresses while Rushdie's disastrously fails, I shall await with interest the full-length studies that will no doubt appear comparing the two novels in detail.

Both are beyond doubt historical novels in the acceptation first popularised by Walter Scott, although there are immediate significant differences between the two writers' projects. Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence* alternates between the Mughal empire under Akbar and the Renaissance Italy of Machiavelli, linking the two via the appearance of a Florentine wanderer, Mogor dell'Amore, at Akbar's court in Fatehpur Sikri and the presence in Florence of Qara Köz, a Mughal princess with magical powers. Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* narrates a more recent period, namely earlier nineteenth-century India in the time of the East India Company: it relates India to the wider world since its theme is the transporting of indentured labourers and convicts to the island of Mauritius on the ship Ibis, and offers a remarkably broad canvas of characters - from the low-caste Bihari ox-cart-driver Kalua and Deeti, the woman he rescues from a sati, through Baboo Nob Kissin, pen-pushing clerk and flamboyant devotee of Krishna, to Paulette, Bengal-raised daughter of a French botanist, and Zachary, a deceptively white-seeming freedman mulatto from Baltimore who becomes the vessel's second mate.

It is new for Rushdie to attempt a fiction set back so far in the past, unless one counts the Arabian dream chapters of *The Satanic Verses; Midnight's Children* has been read, and with good cause, as a historical novel, but it deals with the recent past. Ghosh, by contrast, has already explored a (somewhat later) period of imperial history in Asia, starting from the late nineteenth century, in *The Glass Palace*. A further structural difference is that *Sea of Poppies* is the first part of a trilogy (incidentally a popular novelistic convention in the Bengali tradition), and its narrative is therefore unfinished, whereas Rushdie's is (I would say thank goodness) a single, self-contained narrative. Generically, both are somewhat complex and difficult to define in a nutshell; a degree of experimentalism is common to both, as too are painstaking research and studied intertextuality. Rushdie's degree from Cambridge was in history, and Ghosh's training was as an anthropologist: these novels show the two at pains to demonstrate their research skills, with lengthy bibliographical credits appearing at the end of both. Rushdie, indeed, goes as far in earnest or in play as to blur the fiction/non-fiction divide by listing his historical sources in alphabetical order, over a six-page bibliography which might more aptly grace a straightline academic study.

The Enchantress of Florence marks Rushdie returning in force to the genre with which he made his name, magic realism: his previous novel, *Shalimar the Clown*, had used magic-realist effects fairly sparingly, but here the fantastic *Thousand-and-one-Nights*-type tricks pile up, if anything tediously, starting from the moment when Akbar magicks an imaginary woman into becoming his favourite wife. The novel's fantastic elements coexist rather awkwardly with spoonfuls of dubiously digestible factual material - topographical data on Fatehpur Sikri that might seem straight out of a Lonely Planet guide, historical information about Florentine politics or Central Asian warfare that has all the vitality of a medieval chronicle. Historical novel thus meets fantasy in a fiction that might recall Scott's *The Talisman*, the neglected masterpiece admired by Edward Said that also depicts the East-West encounter; but Rushdie, alas, falls far short of Scott.

Generically, Amitav Ghosh has in the past used magic realism more sparingly than Rushdie - discreetly in his first novel *The Circle of Reason* and fused with non-realist genres such as science fiction and ghost story in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, but elsewhere not at all. *Sea of Poppies* begins as if it is going to be magic-realist, with the young Bihari woman Deeti "seeing" the apparition of a two-masted ship, a "vision not materially present in front of her" on the Ganga outside the opium factory in Ghazipur; but this premonition of the Ibis turns out like the voice from the dead near the beginning of Vikram Chandra's otherwise realist novel *Sacred Games* - to be the book's sole approximation to magic realism. Nonetheless, it somehow does not feel quite appropriate to categorise *Sea of Poppies* unqualifiedly as straight realism, for – a shade disconcertingly till the reader gets used to it - this novel's dominant register is comedy.

In the past it is Rushdie rather than Ghosh who has been associated with the comic, yet here, and despite the presence of such self-evidently severe themes as sati, labour exploitation and racially skewed justice, the timbre of Ghosh's writing is resolutely light and ludic - as, to cite but one instance, in the bizarre moment when Baboo Nob Kissin discovers that Zachary is labelled in the vessel's log as "black" and exultantly concludes he must be a manifestation of Krishna, the Black Lord.

This strong presence of the comic in *Sea of Poppies* is likely to disorient some of Ghosh's critics in the world of postcolonial studies, but others may conclude that he is working within a tradition of Bengali humour and that the comedy is a means of highlighting the resilience and resourcefulness of the ordinary person in the face of oppressive structures.

Intertextuality is certainly a key feature of both novels. In *The Enchantress of Florence*, the magic powers of Qara Köz recall similarly gifted women figures from other magic-realist novels – Sierva Maria in Gabriel García Márquez's *Del amor y otros demonios/Of Love and Other Demons* or Blimunda in José Saramago's *Memorial do Convento/Baltasar and Blimunda*. Mogor dell'Amore's conversations with Akbar may remind the reader of the similar exchanges between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan in Italo Calvino's *Le città invisibili/Invisible Cities*, while the emperor's loverelationship with his (at least in the novel) imaginary wife Jodha echoes Adolfo Bioy Casares' *La invención de Morel/The Invention of Morel*, whose narrator falls in love with a computergenerated woman. In *Sea of Poppies*, the Ibis recalls multiple moments from Herman Melville's maritime writings, resembling the vessels of *Moby-Dick* in its mix of ethnic origins, "Benito Cereno" in its past as a slave-ship, and "Billy Budd" as a locus of on-board class violence; Lewis Carroll a favourite in Bengal is present in a Calcutta banqueting sequence (Ghosh, 232) that evokes his Mock Turtle and his "beautiful soup" in its "hot tureen"; and the IWE tradition too is paid homage to in a trial for forgery that recalls the one in R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*. It remains to be seen, however, which out of Rushdie's and Ghosh's intertextual practice is the more productive.

Meanwhile, the two novels certainly converge in demonstrating a rich exuberance of language. In Rushdie's narrative, however thin or flat the story, the writing has the denseness and inventiveness that its author's readers have come to expect from him, but it does not present any real innovations on his previous practice.

Ghosh, by contrast, breaks new ground: while *The Glass Palace* and *The Hungry Tide* certainly had their share of non-English lexical items, Indian or more generally Asian, *Sea of Poppies* in numerous places piles up the Indian (Bengali or Bhojpuri) or lascar-pidgin terms to the point where some readers might begin to get confused.

Here Ghosh's practice resembles that of Vikram Chandra in *Sacred Games*, with its accumulations of Bombay argot; and Ghosh, like Finally and inevitably, the reader of both novels has to ask the questions, "what is this book about?" and "was it worth reading"? Last-ditch defenders of Rushdie will no doubt respond that his latest book is a significant exploration of the East-West meeting and of cultural pluralism as - it could be argued - evinced in observations of the type: "There is no particular wisdom in the East ... All human beings are foolish to the same degree" (Rushdie, 286), or: "discord, difference, disobedience, disagreement, irreverence, iconoclasm, impudence, even insolence, might be the wellsprings of the good" (Rushdie, 310).

Whether, however, such gnomic observations stand up in the context of this novel's one-dimensional, tinsel narrative with its accretions of clichés and stereotypes both eastern and western, dry-as-dust chronology and box-of-tricks magic realism, is quite another matter.

Amitav Ghosh, meanwhile, while also signifying "miscegenation and mongrelism" (Ghosh, 442) in terms that might appear to parallel Rushdie, succeeds - as Rushdie does not - in pushing his fictional practice into new dimensions of formal and linguistic experimentation while, most importantly, telling a moving story that embodies the capacity of ordinary folk to survive and celebrate despite the oppressive incursions of power.

It may sound subjective, but while when I turned the last page of *The Enchantress of Florence* I concluded I had not been able to identify with a single character for a single minute, when *Sea of Poppies* came to an end I was genuinely sorry, while also more than pleased that I will meet Ghosh's characters again in the second instalment.

Who then is going in the right direction, Rushdie or Ghosh? *The Enchantress of Florence* seems to me one of Rushdie's least interesting novels, a damp squib on a par with *Grimus* and *Fury* and a great disappointment after the return to form of *Shalimar the Clown*; while I read *Sea of Poppies* as the work of a Ghosh at the height of his powers, surprising and charming his readers on the level of the page while maintaining a constant human commitment. The war may be on between the flashy gyrations of the postmodern and a surprisingly flexible and resistant Indo-Anglian realist tradition, within the fraught terrain, with its increasing globalised burden, of Indian Writing in English.

10

Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason* A Study of Diaspora

Ghosh's first novel, *The Circle of Reason* (1986), follows the fortunes a young weaver, Alu, who is brought up in a Bengal village and, after a false accusation that he is a member of a terrorist group, subsequently flees westwards, first to a fictional Gulf state and later to Algeria. The novel suggests that weaving is a diasporic activity which transcends national origins and unites worlds that have habitually been viewed as separate; and in so doing, it anticipates Ghosh's later contention in *In An Antique Land* (1992) that the medieval trade-routes functioned as a mobile inter-continental network that was largely unaware of Western Oriental/Occidental bifurcations.

A picaresque tale, with comic and intellectual overtures, THE CIRCLE OF REASON tells the story of the orphan Alu, adopted by his elderly uncle, a teacher in a small Indian village. Balaram Bose had been a brilliant student, but his obsession with rationalism has declined into a fanatical study of phrenology. After measuring Alu's lumpy head, he has him apprenticed as a weaver, where he soon surpasses even his master.

Unfortunately, Balaram also is involved in a local feud, which ultimately results in the bombing of his home. Alu, the only survivor and a suspect in the bombing, flees, closely followed by a young Indian policeman, Jyoti Das. Taking ship across the Arabian Sea, Alu arrives at the small, oil-rich state of al-Ghazira, where he moves into the home of Zindi, an enormously fat madam. After a near fatal accident, he has a vision worthy of his uncle—the people of the Indian quarter will wage war on germs and money. This bizarre social experiment almost succeeds, until the local government brutally ends it. Alu flees again with Zindi and other friends, still closely pursued by Das. Finally, after wandering over much of North Africa, they accidentally meet in a small Saharan village, concluding with a sad denouement which determines their future.

A mere plot summary hardly does justice to this dense novel, loaded as it is with plots, subplots, dozens of nationalities, and the complicated intellectual rationale for Alu and Balaram's theories. American readers may find this heavy going, but close reading will yield definite rewards. Ghosh has undeniable talent, particularly in that peculiar synthesis of the intellectual, the comic, and the ridiculous which is so intrinsic to life in India, but he would be well-advised to prune his cast and plot in future works. Still, this is an amusing and provoking look at the "real" India, for those with the time and interest.

An Elder Statesman among Indian Writers in English

We view Amitav Ghosh as an "elder statesman" among Indian writers in English. His work has received wide critical acclaim: winning several prizes and major nominations. His novels deal with interesting themes set against historical backdrops. Ghosh's roots are in journalism and academic writing, investigations and analysis, a revelation of subterranean connections and patterns. But first and foremost, and overriding all the many ideas that inform his work, are his characters whose lives engage us and take us to some richly imagined places and times.

The Circle of Reason

Ghosh's first novel, *The Circle of Reason*, follows the fortune of a young weaver, Alu, who is brought up in a

Bengal village. After a false accusation that he is a member of a violent extremist group, he flees westwards, first to a fictional Gulf state and later to Algeria.

Elements of the Story

The first section of the novel contains a number of incidental observations on Indian migrations.

Balaram's birth year 1924, for example, reminds the narrator of crucial moments in the history of Indian emigration to the West, the Canada's colonial government decided not to admit "eight thousand Indians ... after deciding that the ancient purity of Canada could not be endangered by Asiatic immigration."

Ghosh also provides several instances of internal Diasporas in this part of the novel. The people of Lalpukur, for example, had been "vomited out of their native soil" in the carnage connected with the partition of India; within the narrative time of the novel they witness once again the spectacle of people being "dumped hundreds of miles away" because of the civil war that led to the emergence of Bangladesh.

The Story of Alu, the Wanderer, Seeking a Home

Ghosh's diasporic consciousness comes out most clearly in the central section of the novel where Alu has to roam all over the India and the Middle East. Within India, Alu moves first to Calcutta and then to the south, always just managing to elude the police and Das till he finally reaches Mahe, the southernmost part of India's west coast.

Having reached land's end, Alu, still trying to evade arrest by the Indian police, takes the ultimate diasporic move – he leaves the country behind and sails over the Indian ocean to Al-Ghazira.

Hazards of Migration

Alu's journey across the Indian Ocean on a mechanized boat allows Ghosh to depict the risks endured by thousands of Indians who leave their native land in search of a prosperous future. Illegal emigrants hazard their lives voyaging on frail vessels. Alu's particular boat also bears witness to the wide range of social types who make the dangerous crossing in pursuit of economic security: among the passengers are a professor, a travelling salesman, and a madam and her girls, one of whom is even pregnant.

Dreams and Desperation

Ghosh takes time to emphasize the desperation and the dreams that move these people. A pregnant woman, for instance, had been lured to al-Ghazira by someone who has made her innumerable promises –"Your child, Your child will be this, it will be that, it will have houses and cars, and multistoried buildings; it will be a Ghaziri by birth." Zindi, the madam on the boat, also describes her success in attracting people to her establishment in Al-Ghazira: "I can find any man a good a job. And as for women they find me and come running".

The Archetypal Nature of the Journey

As the boat bearing this batch of hopefuls approaches the quintessential Middle Eastern boom city of Al-Ghazira, Ghosh emphasizes the archetypal nature of its journey. It is doing what hundreds of other boats have been doing for a century and a half "carrying ... an immense cargo of wanderers seeking their own destruction in giving flesh to the whims of capital".

Death of Individuals and Their Dreams

The Al-Ghazira section of the book offers fresh evidence of Ghosh's fascination with a diasporic consciousness and the precarious lives led by migrant workers. This section begins with a description of burial of Alu in the rubble of the building, The Star. The multi commercial complex collapses due to false workmanship. When Alu is buried in the debris of a newly built commercial complex that collapsed, he is saved by an antique sewing machine on which a huge slab of falling concrete comes to rest "just a hair away from his nose".

A Chronicle of Al-Ghazira

Al-Ghazira, in fact, is a phenomenon of which Ghosh is one of the first chronicler: the exodus of thousands of men and women of the Third World to the Middle East in search of an alternative, and viable, future. A cross-eyed egg-seller is said to be able to see Cairo and Bombay simultaneously. Disabled persons, Filipino faces, Indian faces, Egyptian faces, Pakistani faces, even a few Ghazira's faces a whole world of faces.

Indeed, certain parts of Al-Ghazira have the cosmopolitan hustle and bustle of a contemporary vanity fair. It is almost as "though half the world's haunts had been painted in miniature along the side of the single street of the city".

Although these faces and the places have filled the desert spaces of the Middle East, they have not been able to make Al-Ghazira into a home, because there were problems everywhere, no matter what you were paid, and because "foreign places are all alike in that they are not home. Nothing binds you there".

The Magic Realism and the Protagonist

Alu is indisputably the main protagonist, the glue that holds a nomadic novel together, but, for much of the action, he is the silent centre around which an abundance of other stories are told. Many of these include fabulous elements and, although Ghosh never departs from the bounds of what is strictly possible, the use of fantasy suggests a world-view that has affinities with both contemporary magic realism and a range of South Asian narrative traditions. Ghosh is adept at twisting and turning his narrative line. Eventually the story climaxes in the al-Ghazira section with a confrontation that will see Alu, an idealist like his uncle, being routed by the forces of the capital. Alu's campaign to destroy the power of money which Alu has identified the root of all evil, is crushed. However Zindi manages to extricate Alu, herself and Kulfi and Boss, two other members of the household, from the mess created by Alu's quixotic scheme, and eventually they all end up in the little town of El-Qued at the northeastern tip of the Algerian Sahara.

Return to Realism of a World Full of Suffering and Injustice

In El-Qued, the fugitives come across the Vermas, two Indian doctors who have taken up jobs in the Algerian desert. Mrs.Verma is delighted to see the fugitives, because Kulfi appears to be just the woman she wanted to cast as the heroine of her production of a Bengali dance drama. In the desert town of El-Qued The Circle of Reason is completed. Mrs. Verma, brisk and nonsensical, manages to disabuse Alu of the dream of a world purified by rational methods. The most important thing, we learn, is to "try to be a better human being". The only hope is "to naje di di wutg wgat we've got."

Not surprisingly, at the end of Ghosh's first novel, his major characters resume their travel again, disburdened of false dreams. Zindi and Alu head for "home" via Tangiers. Das joins them as he moves forward for a migrant's life in Germany. He will accompany Alu and Zindi till Tangiers, where migrating birds fill the sky as they make their annual flights.

A Story of Metaphors – The Journey

The characters are converted into possible metaphors. Their quest is for a specific structuring of their entity in the totality of their experience however, trivial and absurd it is. The characters achieve this appropriation of their significance through their creative capabilities while the novelist himself realizes this through magic and irony and by diverting some of his story telling abilities to the characters who move in exotic settings. The story abounds in bizarre moments but is basically a serious attempt to deal with man's delusive quest for reason within the context of contemporary Diaspora that has taken countless Third World workers and professionals across continents in quest of a better life. Not that Ghosh's treatment of these themes is unfailingly interesting. At over four hundred pages, the book is bound to strike most readers as overlong and overwrought.

Ghosh focus is at times blurred, and he fails to sustain the narrative pace on more than one occasion. The journey as a motif runs throughout the novel and unites the three parts of the novel. Characters cross borders "with almost the biological necessity, if not always with the ease and nonchalance of migratory birds". This motif is particularly associated with Alu who is on the run having been branded an extremist by the police and moves from Lalpukur to Kerala and then sets off to Al-Ghazira in the Middle East along with a number of characters who are in search of material wealth and more opportunities. Travel itself is converted into a homeland.

JOURNEY MOTIF IN CIRCLE OF REASON

Dr. Amitav Ghosh, a Bengali born English writer has so far produced seven novels and four non-fiction works. His first novel The Circle of Reason is almost a debate on ideas like 'rationality', 'socialism' and issues like change, rootlessness, multiculturalism, post-colonial diaspora and journey both spatial and temporal.

Journey is one of the predominating motifs one finds in Amitav Ghosh. It is just not shifting places in geographical dislocation but observing imbibing and experiencing life and its varied circumstances and learning from them. It is also not shifting places along with the traffic of life but contributing a meaningfulness to one's life.

Alu is the protagonist of the novel who is unfortunate to lose his parents in a car accident when he was hardly eight. He is then left in the care of his uncle and aunt in a small village. This marks his first dislocation. He became the object of interest to his uncle because the strange shape of his head. It is all bumpy with projections an depressions. That's why people fancied to call him Alu, the potato head. Alu is exceptionally silent and his emotions are all hidden. But he is very good at learning languages. He is often seen in his uncle's study and read a lot for a boy of ten. He grew less interested in studies and gave up going to school. By the time he is fifteen, he is already spinning cloth and became a weaver.

Alu's uncle thought out a plan for fighting his foe. He used carbolic acid against him, which he collected to clean the area from pollution. The police cracked down on them, luckily, Alu is saved, but he had to run away from this place. He landed in Calcutta. The police are chasing for him there also. So he is on the move for his life. He traveled through Madurai Coimbatore and finally reach Kerala. From there he is helped to board the ship taking him to the west to a place called Al-Ghazira.

Alu is sheltered with some others in a house as a paying guest and he worked as a construction worker. But one day as he was inside the structure, the whole building collapsed with Alu caught inside. After four days Alu was rescued from the debris. He was perfectly fine. When he was in the debris, he thought of a plan to fight corruption. The answer that struck him is carbolic acid, the same his uncle used to clean the place. Once again the police are after Alu and he had to run away to safety. This time he runs to Algerian Sahara.

Alu is exposed to different experiences from which he gathers important lessons. He understands the real use of rationalism and he is purged of the dross that is in his psyche and evolves out to be independent and useful. The police stop their search as the motives are cleansed.

In all this Alu has been traveling; he starts journeying when the knowledge dawns upon him that action alone is not sufficient but it should be complimented by good motives also. The story is trisected as Satwa, the reason; Rajas, the passion and Tamas, the death. Death is a necessary condition to transcend into a higher level of being. That is exactly the place Alu comes to begin his journey.

He gets rid of his physical deformities and his head is clear of all the bumps. He is seen confidently marching homewards to India.

Amitav Ghosh like Oscar Wilde portrays Alu as in Picture of Dori Grey, where his mental aberrations come out in physical terms. The journey takes him forward to progressiveness of both mental and psychological realms.

Incendiary Circumstances: A Chronicle of the Turmoil of Our Times

Those of us protected from the world's miseries by the accident of birth or circumstance find it easy to ignore the wars, genocides, starvations, tsunamis, and earthquakes that devastate so many regions. Still, there are some brave souls who seek out the dark places, who strive to understand, and then explain, to the rest of us, how the other two-thirds lives.

Novelist and essayist Amitav Ghosh is one of those people, and his "Incendiary Circumstances" is a compilation of essays spanning two decades. They cover different countries and crises, but each is enlightened by Ghosh's signature intelligence and humanity. This is a writer who delights in human complexity, who avoids generalities and seeks out the small truths that illuminate the larger story.

Ghosh does not pretend to be an objective, academic observer. In "Countdown," an essay on the strange brew of pride and fatalism that Indians feel about their nuclear weapons program, Ghosh confesses that his antagonism toward the West's hypocrisy when it comes to Third World nations developing nuclear weapons was so strong that he was willing to put aside his own beliefs about the irrationality of such a development program. If there were good arguments to be made for such a program, he says, he wanted to hear them from the mouths of the Indians and the Pakistanis. After interviewing scholars and politicians and ordinary people, he admits that he hasn't heard a compelling argument to convince him of the need for such a program.

In another, older essay, "The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi," Ghosh himself becomes a part of the action. Describing the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination and the ensuing massacre of Sikhs by Hindu mobs, Ghosh writes about his small role in ensuring the safety of a Sikh couple, who, until it was almost too late, refused to believe that they could be the targets of a mob's fury. But despite the drama of that passage, the heart of the essay lies in the small acts of resistance mounted by ordinary citizens outraged by the carnage.

Despite its title, "Incendiary Circumstances" contains several essays that are not in the least bit incendiary. Two, in particular, "The March of the Novel Through History" and 'The Ghat of the Only World,' are nostalgic homages to bygone individuals and cultures.

These and other portraits of civilizations at the cusp of change give the book its measured, humane feel. Although some of these essays are almost 20 years old, the universality of their subject matter and Ghosh's fine, precise prose make them feel urgent and current.

On the cover of this fine book is a photo of 10 men rowing a small boat. They're looking ahead, perhaps at an oncoming threat. Amitav Ghosh, with prose as his oar, assumes a similar outlook toward the world, maintaining a steady gaze at an uncertain future. An Anglophone writer of Bengali origin, he has five novels and a previous work of nonfiction to his credit. *Incendiary Circumstances*, released in hardcover in 2005 and now available in paperback, is his second nonfiction opus.

One could call it 'The Amitav Ghosh Reader, as it collects essays written over a 20-year span for such periodicals as *The New Yorker, The New Republic, The Nation, Granta, the Kenyon Review* and more. Ghosh's focus here is 'turmoil,' as his subtitle promises. He is not out to prettify the world – an impossible task when one's subjects are the South Asian tsunami, 9/11, Burma, Cambodia, Kashmir, the India-Pakistan nuclear standoff and so forth. It would be wrong, however, to assume that Ghosh's voice is a despairing one. His dispatches are marked by a palpable sense of awe. To read them is to marvel, as the author does, at the weight and irony of history, the idiosyncrasy and strength of human character against all odds.

In every piece, Ghosh summons an enviable mastery of craft. He holds a Ph.D. in social anthropology from Oxford, and his writing is stamped with the academic rigour of that field. But he engages world politics in a fluid literary style; even his most fact-oriented pieces read like gripping short stories. He tends to favor the first-person voice, in the style of both a memoirist and a narrative journalist. The final chapter, 'The Imam and the Indian,' finds Ghosh mingling with a group of Egyptian villagers. He remarks: 'Some of them had passports so thick they opened out like ink-blackened concertinas'. One can only wonder about the girth of Ghosh's own passport. It is hard to keep track of all the places he has called home: Calcutta and Delhi, East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), Sri Lanka, England, Egypt, Brooklyn. Fluent in multiple languages, a citizen of the world, Ghosh does not offer brusque opinions or ideological pronouncements. He brings to his work the quiet authority of personal witness and firsthand knowledge.

For a clearer idea of Ghosh's uniqueness, consider a passage from his 1988 novel *The Shadow Lines*. The narrator, reuniting in London with his childhood friend Ila, can't hide his fascination with everything he sees in the Underground. But Ila won't stop and smell the roses:

> It would irritate her to see how excited I got when we stepped on to the escalators ... she would tug at my elbows and hiss: Hurry, hurry, you can't stop here, you'll hold people up....
>
> And I would say to her: You wouldn't understand: to you Cairo was a place to piss in.
>
> I could not persuade her that a place does not merely exist, that it has to be invented in one's imagination....

To 'invent' a place, for Ghosh, is not to fabricate or falsify it, but to render it all the more real. And the need to invent is nothing less than a moral and political matter, for 'if we didn't try ourselves, we would never be free of other people's inventions.' Ghosh's previous nonfiction book, *In An*

Antique Land: History in the Guise of a Traveler's Tale, is a fine example of this imperative in action. Partly an account of the relationships he developed while doing research in rural Egypt, it is also a learned meditation on the Geniza of the Synagogue of Ben Ezra, a chamber in which Egyptian Jews of long ago would discard their 'letters, bills, contracts, poems, marriage deeds and so on.' Centuries later, the Geniza became 'the greatest single collection of medieval documents ever discovered.' Ghosh seizes on an extraordinary piece of correspondence from the 12th century, written in the dead Judaeo-Arabic language. Unlocking its mysteries to conjure a world lost to Western imperialism, he weaves it into the narrative like a plot line from a thriller. In the process, he practically dissolves the boundary between the distant past and the bustling present, the pre- and post-colonial eras.

'Dancing in Cambodia,' one of the centrepiece essays from *Incendiary Circumstances*, has a similar impact. Written in 1993, it begins with a novelistic (though well researched) tale of a 1906 trip to France by King Sisowath and his entourage, including a young troupe of Khmer dancers. Leaping forward in time, Ghosh recounts how the same royal family brought into its midst a little boy called Saloth Sar, who would later take the name Pol Pot. Venturing into the middle of nowhere on the back of his interpreter's scooter, Ghosh locates Pol Pot's home village and speaks to some of his living relatives, who seem just as grief-stricken and befuddled as anyone else. After diagnosing the madness of the Khmer Rouge and assessing the human and cultural losses of 1975-79, Ghosh charts the re-emergence of classical Khmer dance, showcased all those years ago in France, very nearly erased from the earth.

The remaining 16 pieces vary in length and format. Two of them, 'Imperial Temptations' and 'The Fundamentalist Challenge,' read more like opeds. 'The March of the Novel Through History' and several others fall under literary criticism, which is not as tangential to turmoil as it may seem. 'The Town By the Sea,' the most recent, is Ghosh's report from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the wake of the tsunami. 'Countdown,' from 1998, is a critique of the nuclear 'bomb cult' in India and Pakistan, as well as a nuanced portrait of George Fernandes, the former anti-nuclear activist who served as defense minister in the hardline Vajpayee government. 'At Large in Burma,' from 1996, recounts Ghosh's meetings with Aung San Suu Kyi and his jungle travels with a group of ethnic Karenni insurgents. There is no Iraq war piece in this collection. But a theme runs through the pages like a recurring nightmare, and its pertinence is obvious to anyone following Iraq's Sunni-Shia bloodbath. For Ghosh, what we are now calling 'sectarian violence' is no abstraction.

In 'The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi' (1995) he recalls, in harrowing detail, the anti-Sikh pogroms that followed Indira Gandhi's assassination in Delhi in 1984. Hundreds were slaughtered without mercy. But Ghosh personally witnessed Hindus undertaking great risk to shield their Sikh neighbours. Uncharacteristically, he joined a small protest march, during which a phalanx of unarmed women surrounded the marauders and shamed them into dispersing. 'The truth,' Ghosh writes, 'is that the commonest response to violence is one of repugnance, and that a significant number of people try to oppose it in whatever ways they can'.

We can only hope that one day, someone will record the unheralded bravery being mustered by Iraqi civilians at this very moment. In his 2001 essay 'The Greatest Sorrow,' Ghosh describes how his Delhi experience brought back repressed memories of the anti-Hindu riots he witnessed as a boy in Dhaka in 1964. The effect on his development as a writer could not have been more profound. With Shyam Selvadurai's novel *Funny Boy* as a guide, Ghosh also examines the anti-Tamil mob violence that occurred in Sri Lanka in 1983. Further on, in 'The Fundamentalist Challenge,' he arrives at yet another sorry example: the destruction of the Ayodhya mosque by Hindu extremists in 1992, and the appalling mass slaughter of Muslims that followed. In every case, there was abundant evidence of human compassion across ethnic lines, but also 'clear instances of collusion between officials and criminals,' wherein 'the information-gathering function of government was turned to the sinister purpose of targeting minority populations' (p. 45). However futile it may seem, Ghosh argues, demanding accountability is of utmost importance.

In his preface, citing the influence of Mahatma Gandhi, Ghosh poses 'the question that haunts these essays: is it possible to write about situations of violence without allowing your work to become complicit with the subject?' There is something approaching an answer in this passage from 'The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi':

> To write carelessly, in such a way as to appear to endorse terrorism or repression, can add easily to the problem, and in such incendiary circumstances, words cost lives, and it is only appropriate that those who deal in words should pay scrupulous attention to what they say. It is only appropriate that they should find themselves inhibited. (p. 201)

Ghosh is moved to repeat the above at the very start of the book, but tellingly, he omits the final sentence. Is he troubled by what might seem a call for self-censorship? It's clear enough that inhibition can stem either from fear and cowardice or from a sense of public responsibility. Ghosh means the latter, and his rebuke rings clear, even if its target is ambiguous.

In the aftermath of 9/11, Ghosh's call for introspection went largely unheeded. The right flew into a jingoistic fury and cast suspicion on anyone with differing opinions. But there was hubris among the dissenters as well. Another Anglophone Indian novelist, Arundhati Roy, offered the following in *The Guardian*:

> In the absence of information, politicians, political commentators and writers (like myself) will invest the act with their own politics, with their own interpretations. This speculation, this analysis of the political climate in which the attacks took place, can

> only be a good thing. Forget what the hijackers believe, in other words; better to focus on what Roy believes. Far from being a good thing, this was an intellectual charade. Flattering herself as representative of those who 'ask the hard questions and say the harsh things' (inhibitions be damned), Roy declared: 'The world will probably never know what motivated those particular hijackers who flew planes into those particular American buildings.' Leave aside the fact that she was wrong. The supposed information vacuum didn't stop her from deciding on all sorts of motivations, all pertaining to U.S. imperialism, none to extremist ideology.

Ghosh, by contrast, had come to grips with the new fanaticism well before the first World Trade Center attack. In 1990 he delivered this verdict on the thuggish Society of Muslims, the group that menaced Egypt's Nobel Prize winner Naguib Mahfouz:

> The Society of Muslims have effectively scorned Muslim history: they have rejected all of medieval Muslim scholarship, including the great jurists who set up the four major schools of Islamic law, and they have also claimed the right to interpret the Koran. A century ago it is they who would have been counted the blasphemers, and any one of their current claims would probably have cost them their lives.

This alone is worth more than all the speculation Roy can muster. To be clear:

> Ghosh certainly sees the need for critique of U.S. foreign policy as well – read 'Imperial Temptations' if you doubt it. But he looks at the rise of Islamist aggression as an issue in its own right, not simply as a karmic response to the West. We're left to speculate, however, about Ghosh's own response to Roy and the school of radical critique she epitomises. Belonging to no camp or clique, he evinces little interest in the intramural squabbles of the left, which is at once frustrating and refreshing.

Having traversed the continents, and having wrestled all his life with the phenomenon of politically motivated murder of civilians, Ghosh saw 9/11 at close range, as a Brooklyn resident. He concludes 'The Greatest Sorrow' with his thoughts about that day. Far from relativising the attack or declaring 'an absence of surprise' as Roy did, Ghosh said this: As a writer I have tried to live by the credo that nothing human should be alien to me. Yet my imagination stops short as I try to think of the human realities of what it must mean to plan a collective suicide over a span of years or to stand in a check-in line with people whose murder has already been decided on; of what it takes to speak of love on a cell phone moments before one's death or to reach for a stranger's hand as one leaps from the topmost floor of a skyscraper. These are new dimensions of human experience, and I realize that they will become a part of the generational gap that separates me from my children: their imagining of the world will be different from mine, and that very difference will create a new reality.

> [...] The thickening crust of our awareness is both a sign and a reminder of our unwitting complicity in the evolution of violence: if that which mesmerized us yesterday ceases to interest us today, then it follows that the act which will next claim our attention will be even more horrific, even more resistant to yesterday's imagination, than the last. The horror of these acts is thus exactly calibrated to the indifference upon which they are inflicted.

On July 7, 2007, in the poor Shiite Turkmen village of Amerli in Iraq, a truck bomb containing 4.5 tons of explosives killed at least 150 people and wounded 265. Even the single worst atrocity of the civil war to date aroused little comment. (Update: The coordinated August 14 bombings near Sinjar killed over 500 and wounded over 1500, according to the Iraqi Red Crescent Society.) As I read the story on *the New York Times* website, an AT and T mobile ad popped up and danced around my screen, obscuring the text for a few long seconds.

This is how we live now: we cannot even read about the day's death toll without commercial interruption. Ghosh is hardly the first to say it: we are indifferent.

To George W. Bush, that little pop-up is probably useful. The more distractions, the better. We shouldn't focus on every bomb, every internecine massacre, the president has said. The media ought to cover the 'good news' from Iraq. It's hardly surprising Bush would brush aside the fact that informed citizenship, not to mention competent leadership, requires facing the bad news, unflinchingly and with a sober eye. 'Misery is the river of the world,' goes the song by Tom Waits. 'Everybody row.' Ghosh drives home the lesson that surrendering to indifference will only make it worse. With consummate skill and creativity, he helps us row, and somehow never leaves us adrift.

11

The Battle of *Chronos* and *Kairos*: Mixing Genres in *The Calcutta Chromosome*

Different interpretative keys may be applied to Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), emphasising the various peculiar aspects of a novel that draws upon several genres and modes, from the postcolonial to the scientific thriller, from the postmodern to the mystery tale. In this chapter I shall deal with the science fiction and postmodern strategies of textual organisation that rely on the cultural notions of *chronos* and *kairos* as the two governing paradigms of the whole novel. This type of inventive narrative plays up with a large dose of ambiguity so as to mesmerise and disturb the reader at the same time, while stories within stories emerge and articulate the plots involving Antar, Murugan, Ross and the other characters.

Let us start off by analysing the science fiction elements that Amitav Gosh subtly deploys in his work: although this is not a typical science fiction novel, I would argue that the pseudo-scientific and fantastic modalities somehow constitute the textual backbone of the book and allow the author to speculate upon several issues and twist the timelines. The incipit of the novel displays a mildly dystopian atmosphere when we are shown Antar trying to examine the remnant of an ID with the help of his powerful computer. An employee for the International Water Council, formerly known as

LifeWatch, "a small but respected non-profit organization that served as a global health consultancy and epidemiological data bank", the man lives in a slightly bleak New York. It is a futuristic landscape that, to a certain degree, is reminiscent of the urban setting of Philip Dick's Los Angels in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*.

Furthermore, the resourceful telematic tool that Antar uses is a powerful computer called Ava, a machine who can hear, speak and operate in marvellous ways. Proficient in all world languages and dialects (Mandarin, Bengali, Hindi, Arabic, the dialects of Upper Amazon, and so forth), Ava is instrumental in starting the story development. The novelist adopts the literary device of personification in the description of Ava, rendered as a "she" with a special "eye, a laser-guided surveillance camera" , and perhaps also alludes to another very famous fictional computer, namely HAL 9000 ("Heuristically programmed Algorithmic computer") from Arthur C. Clarke's *2001 Space Odyssey* (1968), whose iconic red camera eye seemed to warn and threat the fate of mankind. Here, however, Ava is given a positive role while supporting Antar, an Egyptian-born exponent of a not too distant technocracy, in his exploration of some mysterious lives and events. The motif of the quest, which cuts across both fantasy and science fiction, generates a series of questions and acts that are told through flash-forward and flash-back techniques. In this sense, the writer juxtaposes his work not only with futuristic literature but postmodern narrative as well.

Indeed, I would like to underscore Ghosh's numerous attempts in evoking a questioning and metaphysical milieu that encompasses all the narrative levels. In his hypnotic, darkly skewered writing, the author seems to suggest that, if we unearth cultural, historical and textual layers, we may approach inner meanings and interact with Fate. For instance, if we focus upon the episode of the paper-wrapped fish revealing some clues of the scientific enigma underlying the novel, we can observe the deft author composing some parts of a wider puzzle. With its large amount of knotted tension, the joining of apparently mundane episodes and facts mirrors the activity of looming Destiny and its mechanisms. The scene operates in the textual architecture as the apt combination of sequences of events and could be interpreted as the postmodernist realisation of casualness.

To a certain extent, it echoes the eerie dynamics that Italo Calvino adopts in his *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (1979), in which apparently insignificant incidents are linked together within a more complex design. Since the apparent chaos that dominates the intertwined stories belongs to the postmodernist vision that enquiries about life and the sense of being in its multiple forms, the malaria mystery, sketched by means of a labyrinthine reconstruction, poses more questions than answers and invests characters and readers alike. Affecting the rigid authoriality of narration, the postmodernist propensity of this novel leads towards the area of diaphanous multiplicity, so that eventually, as Subhash Chandra claims, "Ghosh does not want to achieve Murugan's truth, which in turn will become Antar's truth, to become final, transcendent, negating the possibilities of being further questioned, investigated into by others, who might come up with 'their' truths". And it is not incidental that the novel ends with a polyphonic multitude haunting Murugan's consciousness: "there were voices everywhere now, in his room, in his head, in his ears, it was as though a crowd of people were in the room with him. They were saying 'We're with you; you're not alone; we'll help you across'.

I have made reference to science fiction and postmodernism as two possible visions that the writer delicately tangles up in his text but, in order to detect the signs of ambiguity and chaos that mark *The Calcutta Chromosome*, we also ought to consider the paratextual elements. The subtitle of the text ("a novel of fevers, delirium and discovery"), the titles of the two sections ("August 20: Mosquito Day" and "The Day After") and the opening lyric penned by Nobel-awarded Ronald Ross all contribute to the mysterious atmosphere bestowed upon this quasi-scientific thriller as they suggest or bespeak of disease, epidemic, catastrophe, invention, warnings. In other words, it is an instable world that seems to be doomed to chaos and simultaneously manipulated by secret powers.

I would like to focus upon the core duality of *kairos* and *chronos* that shape the different sequences of Ghosh's storytelling. Their opposition is closely related to the symbols of postmodernism and science fiction, and determines the incessant time shifts of the text. Essentially, the novel is organised as a triple narrative, with Antar who explores the cyberspace to find out the real identity of Murugan, probably the best expert on Ronald Ross, the scientist who discovered the malarial parasite during the time of the Raj. The three are textually joined together by reciprocal links and references, whilst more characters participate to the plot construction generating other minor narrative patterns. This multilayered structure, which incorporates stories within stories or connect stories to other stories, to me is an example of the skilled *mise en abîme* that Ghosh extracts from sources and models galore. Although deictic elements anchor the narration and description of people, places and times – we read about future New York, Victorian Calcutta, specific points in time, and so forth – there is a deliberate choice of lack of preciseness and clarity as the cues of the mystery gradually appear and disappear, or turn out to change their own nature or meaning. I would consider this feeling of precarious wholeness a conceptual clash between *chronos* and *kairos*.

I shall now concentrate on these two significant culture-bound concepts, which I borrow from classical Greek culture. The former refers to the chronological or sequential passing of time, the latter indicates "a time of changes" or, if we extend its semantic value, "something special or even extraordinary". *Chronos* and *kairos* represent primordial forces, respectively endowed with their quantitative and qualitative nature. In particular, we should be aware that the exact gist of *kairos* depends on who uses the term, and consequently the various protagonists re-invent or imagine its value considering their own circumstances. The magic or extraordinary moment can be the good results of Antar's research, the investigation carried out by Murugan, or the discovery of a cure for malaria in Ross' case. Every character in this novel subtly, and perhaps unconsciously, try to pursue the power of *kairos* and escape to yoke of *chronos*. Embracing the dimensions of present, past and future at the same time, Ghosh deeply reinforces the collusion of storylines and timelines, and in so doing he accelerates or delays narration on the brink of collapse, so as to achieve a high degree of suspense.

Shuttling between these two notions, the writer intermixes his stories and tackles the issue of knowledge too, perceived as burden of undecipherable values. Let us take into account a short dialogue between Antar and Murugan and let us observe how their turn-takings reveal or hide two contrasting visions:

> 'Tell me Ant', Murugan said, fixing his piercing gaze upon Antar's face. 'Tell me: do you think it's natural to want to turn the page, to be curious about what happened next'?
>
> 'Well', said Antar, uncomfortably, 'I'm not sure if I know what you mean.'
>
> 'Let me put it like that then', said Murugan. 'Do you think that everything that can be known, should be known?'
>
> 'Of course', said Antar. 'I don't see why not'.
>
> 'All right', said Murugan, dipping his spoon in his bowl. 'I'll turn a few pages for you; but remember, it was you who asked. It's your funeral.'

'Curiosity killed the cat' says the proverb, and Murugan's sinister warning emphasizes the gloomy intricacies of the story. We are reminded that different cultural forces and forms of knowledge are at work in this novel: scientific research, information technology, medicine, religious traditions, but also philosophy,

> theosophy and existentialism as well as history and anthropology. Such encyclopaedic display of knowledge seems to characterise the pathways that the characters decide to take.

Their quest is either inclined to the logical-scientific type of speculation or close to philosophical or religious belief, and in this binary structure the former depends intimately on the construction and accumulation of knowledge through experiments over time (*chronos*), whilst the latter prescribes a turning point in time, a kind of epiphany (*kairos*) disclosing truth and explaining reality in the attempt to give meaning to human experience.

The sense of mystery, of times evolving into extraordinary circumstances, of lives multiplied and reflected through the mosaic of history, represents a constant preoccupation in Ghosh's cinematic techniques, and can be exemplified by the following quotation:

> He [Murugan] patted Antar on the shoulder. […] 'And isn't that the scariest thing there is Ant? To hear something said, and not to know who's saying it? Not to know who's speaking? For if you don't know who's saying something, you don't know why they're saying it either'.

Here, narrative voices overlap and disturbingly the reader is metatextually challenged, led astray by the dichotomy of presence and absence besetting modern life. In its vacuum of authoriality, the novel extends its ramifications and casts doubts upon the reliability of narrators caught between the heavy sense of waiting and the expectation of outcomes, as if to assert the impossibility of linear storytelling.

The tense dialogic confrontation between Antar and Murugan is grounded upon the search for meaning or, in other terms, the way to follow in order to reach or construct knowledge, a paramount theme in this intricate textual labyrinth. Antar is unable to comprehend and accept the hypotheses and revelations of Murugan concerning the real goals of the scientific operation to discover the malaria virus, carried out during the Raj by Ronald Ross. Being pushed to the limits of understanding, he is challenged by the apparently impenetrable burden of knowledge, imagined as a tool designed not only to classify the world, but also to change the articulations of life. Such intense philosophical debate lies at the very heart of the following excerpt, which is worth quoting at length:

> 'I'm listening', said Antar. 'For what it's worth.'
>
> 'Maybe none of this makes sense', said Murugan. 'But let's just try and take it on its own terms for a minute. Let's look at the kinds of working hypotheses it yields. Here's one: if it's true that to know something is to change it, then it follows that one way of changing something – of effecting a mutation, let's say – is to attempt to know it, or aspects of it. Right?'

Murugan refers to the idea of knowledge in its high meaning, that is, not only as a coherent and cohesive body of disciplines but rather as a primary interpretative instrument, one which bestows power and relevance, whose strength is born out of accumulation and stratification. In order to skim its gist, we need to undercover and extract its fundamental constituents, and this deconstructionist shift may remind us of an operation of archaeology. We could therefore think of Foucault and his analysis of knowledge within the field of archaeology, whose strategic act of collocation and interpretation is purposeful since "it is not in order to give it a definitive place in an unmoving constellation, but in order to reveal, with the archive, the discursive formations, the positivities, the statements, and their conditions of formation, a specific domain".

In his mesmerising style, Murugan subtly hints at the supremacy of knowledge, although his position is certainly characterised by the token of ambiguity, so that Antar, and implicitly the reader, have to infer and speculate. As some scholars have argued, this is an example of silent knowledge, a conceit that upturns its own definition by foregrounding the authority of silence and lack of availability of knowledge.

Indeed, the mysterious scientific research apparently aimed at the malaria project headed by Ronald Ross hides a cloudy conspiracy penetrating the uncanny secrets of immortality.

Within this malicious plan, which seems to be drawn on espionage fiction or vintage graphic literature, it is imperative not to spread knowledge and reveal findings, but rather to withhold signals or provide false clues. Adopting this vision, Tapan K. Ghosh discusses the speculative attitude of the novelist in terms of binary opposition: "Amitav Ghosh holds that science not only reveals reality but also, at times, creates it. What is known is knowledge. At the other end of this scientific knowledge lies the unknown, the unarticulated truth".

Yet, the author is even subtler, and this opposition ought to be located within a larger cultural arena of confrontation, in which monolithic assertions are placed along a continuum that interferes with processes of mediation. The known and the unknown thus become two related categories that continuously influence each other and trespass their own boundaries according to the provocative style of postmodernist *bricolage*.

However, Ghosh seems to warn that in this scenario there is no clear-cut divide between knowledge and ignorance, as there is no strict conflict between *chronos* and *kairos*, primordial forces which invade each other's space by means of apparently dull coincidences. Probably such sense of displacement is derived from the catharsis of the contemporary over-connected world. In the novel, the rhizomatic chain of events and references appears to link the characters (and the readers) *ad infinitum* not so much through narrative digressions but rather by activating intertextual structures, from mundane episodes in a frozen present to a sleepy future, and then back again towards a crystallised Victorian/Edwardian past. This multiple technique endorses the schizophrenic sense of modernity and postmodernity, so that all the protagonists of the novel are driven by an inner self-questioning about the meaning of their surroundings.

Anthony Giddens in his discourse on modernity, in which he emphasises the character of impelling globalisation as a regulating principle of contemporaneousness, holds that "many of the phenomena often labelled as postmodern actually concern the experience of living in a world in which presence and absence mingle in historically novel days" and in *The Calcutta Chromosome* it is exactly the double dimension of presence and absence – or the known/unknown, or *chronos/kairos*, and other oppositions as well – that ritualises the cycles of existence.

Furthermore, we may tackle the sphere of knowledge from another viewpoint. In an era obsessed with technological developments like ours, the notion of knowledge and the act of passing it on constitute two orienting points, and Ghosh appropriates this intense preoccupation of the contemporary world to speculate about the nervous condition of culture. He craftily anticipates the Internet revolution by creating Ava, a futuristic machine that textually works as an active character within the story structure. However, in spite of its hyperbolic powers and access to worldwide databanks – becoming almost a sacrilegious substitute for a modern deity – Ava cannot solve all the mysteries that cluster around the figure of Ronald Ross, and therefore there are limits that seem to slow the progress of man and his thirst for knowledge.

Computers and other types of technological devices, seen as postmodern repositories of information, knowledge and culture, appear in the open spaces of science fiction but also stand as metaphors of the mind, personified intersections of body and mind, software and hardware. This new mitopoetic attitude emerges in Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* (2004), for instance, where the spread of a new and dangerous computer virus named after Bollywood star Leela Zahir is symptomatic of the deterioration of human relationships and cultural values. A perturbing nymph split between the zone of myth and the domain of Information Technology, Leela treacherously flirts with computers and people by multiplying her identity: not only a challenge for computer geeks, but also the reincarnation of a beautiful silver screen actress, the return of a mythical seductress who oscillates between the roles of a heavenly *apsara* or a threatening *nagini*: "The truth is that Leela was not one thing.

She was not even a set or a group or a family. She was a swarm, a horde. [...] So many Leelas. So many girls with the same face. The glory of all these variants, the glamour that caught so many people unawares, lay in their power of metamorphosis.

With Ghosh's writing we are not shown a similar polysemantic development of the hybrid blend of lore and science, but certainly the fruitful alliance of postmodernism and science fiction affects all the narrative levels. Ava herself builds up bridges between cultures and traditions, but here oblique intertextual references are hidden in the text. Whilst the diaphanous image of the computer bug/beautiful woman *zig-zags* in the text by Kunzru almost working as a figure of speech, or a postmodern simile, in Ghosh's novel it is the entire field of science, bacteriology in particular, that is being re-imagined or re-written on the palimpsest of fiction, so as to built up the apt context for a crescendo of tension and mystery tangled up with historical and narrative events. Such procedure of inventive mediation originates the astutely crafted title, which openly expresses its hypertrophic connections with different genres. Not only does it clearly introduce the atmosphere of a medical thriller within a colonial - or postcolonial - perspective, but it further extends its thematic implications by hinting at the discourse of bioculture in the form of narrative mystery akin to the science fiction motifs of catastrophic pestilence and human destruction.

To sum up such articulated issues, Ghosh's bracing narrative generates human labyrinths, viruses and flesh, chromosomes and bodies constructed as self-contained structures and interstices. Bodies, in particular, in their various conditions – hit by diseases (malaria, syphilis), treated in laboratories, substituted by 'intelligent' computers or evoked as ghosts through the aide of séances – represent multilayered, changeable agencies at work in a Fate-governed world. The multitude of their actions, efforts, and feelings are paralleled by the unravelling of stories. With this baffling implication, the author again turns to the nodes of storytelling, in *equilibrium* between human experience and textual creativity so as to question the intricacies of life and its quest for meanings, split between the influence of *chronos* and *kairos*:

> 'It's strange', said Urmila. 'Just the other day, I was reading a book of Phulboni's essays – you know, the writer who was given the award at Rabindra Sadan yesterday? What you were saying reminded me of something he wrote a long time ago. I remember the passage almost by heart. "I have never known", it begins, "whether life lies in words or in images, in speech or sight. Does a story come to be in the words that I conjure out of my mind or does it live already, somewhere, enshrined in mud and clay – in an image, that is in the crafted mimicry of life?"

12

Magic and Irony as Principles of Structure: A Reading of *The Circle of Reason*

Amitav Ghosh's first novel, *The Circle of Reason,* marked a break from the traditional themes of the Indian English novel and the form and structure of the well-made novel. In fact, the novel could be taken as the starting point of a whole generation of new writers often called Ghosh generation or Stephanine school who have left a lasting imprint on the novel of the eighties setting the tenor for a new thrust in Indian fiction in English. These novelists who have published their first novels in the mid-eighties or early nineties have brought a new internationalism to their fiction, a contemporaneity to their outlook with a daring experimentation in form and structure while at the same time wiping out the linguistic barriers that inhibited the earlier novelists. This group includes Upamanyu Chatterjee, Shashi Tharoor, Allan Sealy, Amit Chaudhuri and Vikram Seth most of whom belong to the urban milieu.

Firdaus Kanga, the author of *Trying to Grow* and *Heaven on Wheels,* while analyzing the progress of these writers, comments that the prospect of this new crop of writers making a distinct mark in world literary scene with their rich cultural heritage and language control is not a far-off proposition: "In fact, the two most promising fields for writing in English lie in India and South Africa. Both have the richness of two of the richest of cultures to draw from. Perhaps India has a slight edge over South Africa because of two things-the superb language control of Amitav Ghoshes and Vikram Seths and the inescapable tinge of South Africa's apartheid antecedents." Binoo K. John views this new writing as a new 'literary Ren-aissance' and pays a glowing tribute to the novelists: "In the history of a country's literature such chapters are seldom written. And when most of it is in the language seemingly alien, the magnitude of the literary Renaissance becomes awe-inspiring. English it seems has finally become the language in which we will tell our stories to the world. And undoubtedly some Indian writers are blitzing their way to find their appointed slots among the galaxy of the immortals."

That this was not misplaced faith in the new writers was shown by the remarks offered by Makarand Paranjape in the course of his discussion of the Indian fiction scene in English in the eighties. He says that it is as if two generations of writers have come into their own this decade. With remarkable output and with such brilliant fictional creation behind them the new writers could compete with the best in the world, perhaps the best in their own right: "It would be no exaggeration to say that the best English fiction in the world is being written by Indians or those of Indian origin." Euphoric as these may sound, the fact remains that these novelists have brought an "innovative energy and comic irreverence" replacing the earlier earnestness and realism.

Postmodern fiction could be characterized by its reluctance to make use of psychological model. It no longer considers the penetration into the depths of the characters as the primary goal of fiction and in fact reduces the characters and events to the level of structural strategies. Reality is presented in its mutation and each fragmented part is invested with hyperbolic dimensions: a strategy that resembles the genius of a painter much different from the skills of a photographer. The immediacy of experience of the reality is conveyed/brought to the readers by a medley of devices: ironic mode of narration, recreating a magical world, and an uninhibited exhibition of narcissistic tendencies. This propensity for metafiction urges the reader's attention to its own techniques and processes of creation; the story-telling ability gains control over the subject it handles. It is natural that such a narration should thrive on bizarre happenings and out of world events since, for the narrator, reality itself is surrealistic and defies description. Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Milan Kundera, Thomas Pynchon and Salman Rushdie have all created this magic web of fantasy to capture reality in their novels.

In *The Circle of Reason*, the attempts of the novelist are obviously oriented to floating the events and characters through a medley of metaphors and select ideas. The all-embracing structural principles of magic and irony eloquently 'weave' the total pattern of the novel and ideas, characters and metaphors are explicated through attendant motifs. In fact, the characters themselves are converted into possible metaphors. Their quest is for a specific structuring of their entity in the totality of experience however trivial and absurd it is. The characters achieve this appropriation of their significance through their creative/manipulative capabilities while the novelist himself realizes this through magic and irony and by diverting some of his story-telling abilities to the characters. As the novel progresses from '*Sattva:* Reason' through '*Rajas:* Passion' to '*Tamas:* Death,' it becomes increasingly clear that Alu, the governing metaphor, comes alive only in the company of other live images and other active, associative metaphors/contexts. The novel, as it turns out, is as much a story of Balaram, his idealism and tragic end, as that of Zindi, her pragmatic outlook and her irrepressible instinct for survival.

And there are many stories narrated by master story-tellers who thrive on and live by their story-telling abilities. The other associative structural principles of weaving, sewing and the book, *Life of Pasteur* act as catalysts in their attempts at defining, redefining and grafting their outlook as they move from one stage to another and from one place to another in a seemingly endless quest for their significance despite having gone through the trivialities time and again. In the endless monotony of life, the characters find their saving grace in their creative capabilities of narration which is what the novel is about. They use their powers like the magic wand of a sorcerer to conjure up weird things even as they fiercely attempt to grapple with reality.

The novel abounds in weird happenings. These, in turn, spark off a series of stories as told and retold by the characters with unusual relish. The narrator's own description acquires ritualistic connotations in tune with his characters' propensity to mix fact with fantasy.

Six months after Alu reaches al-Ghazira, he finds himself buried in the collapse of an immense building called an-Najma, the Star. When it fell, 'it was an avalanche of thousands and thousands of tons of bricks and concrete and cement' and Alu was almost exactly in its centre. The weird happening is described in a prose that is incantatory, deliberately attempted to invoke the Impossibility of the happening without losing the immediacy of its experience:

> People said later that the fall shook the whole of al-Ghazira, like an emptying wave shakes a boat. A tornado of dust swirled out of the debris while the rubble was still shuddering and heaving like a labouring beast and for a few moments the whole city was wrapped in the darkness, despite the full mid-afternoon brilliance of the desert sun.

The survival of Alu despite the might of the inanimate cement· and bricks is indicative of the victory of creative mind over ruthless mechanisms. The far-off Middle East country, al-Ghazira, is one such mechanism. The cut-throat business interests of the place were already hinted at when Alu lay huddled in a heap in the lap of Zindi aboard 'Mariamma' and observes the lights of al-Ghazira in the distance. The description of the artificial glitter of 'the whims of capital' and its exploitative mechanism is invested with human skills, a metaphor for mercantile activity.

The fall, the debris and the subsequent survival of Alu are sufficient to spark off a series of stories in the Ras. Speculation runs high in the locality and a sense of relief is experienced in telling stories and experiencing them even while they wait for the arrival of Alu. When Hajji Fahmy narrates the story of Nuri the Damanhour he could command a captive audience. Abu Fahl is good at narrating real life experiences with a tinge of magical note. When he first visits Alu beneath the rubble and returns home he too commands an enthralled audience as he starts narrating how he had seen Alu alive beneath the rubble and how two sewing machines had saved his life. Later, on another occasion, when he was attacked by the labour contractors they were brought before Hajji Fahmy to pronounce judgement; Abu Fahl relishes the prospect of narrating the whole incident to an attentive audience. He was more interested in the very act of narration rather than the justice he was entitled to.

But it was Zindi who was the master story-teller with her superior powers of narration. She knows her abilities and commands a sure audience even if she repeats the same story any number of times. On hearing the news of Alu's fall she gets ready to tell the story of misfortunes that be-fell Frowning Abusa and Mast Ram, the inmates of her house, before Alu and others had arrived. The audience, as usual are even more prepared to listen to Zindi yet again. The scene of Zindi holding centre-stage like a pre-siding deity by her powers of narration is brought in ritualistic terms:

> They crouched on mats around Zindi, listening intently to every word. They had lived through everything Zindi spoke of and had heard her talk of it time and time again: yet it was only in her telling that it took shape; changed from mere incidents to a palpable thing, a block of time which was not hours or minutes or days, but something corporeal, with its own malevolent wilfulness. That was Zindi's power: she could bring together empty air and give it a body just by talking of it. (212-13)

If their creative abilities form one side of their being, their strange obsessions complete the circle. The clearly marked out attitudes are not only indicative of their search for a pattern but even make them conveyors of ideas. Balaram at Lalpukur is obsessed with phrenology and carbolic acid; Toru-Debi, wife of Balaram, is always preoccupied with the world of sewing machines; Alu with weaving; Jyoti Das, the only character to have accompanied Alu through the three parts apart from the structural entities, is called a Bird Man; Zindi herself is obsessed with Durban Tailoring House; and Professor Samuel with theories of queues.

Alu's initiation into the world of weaving is to be viewed as much an act of admiration for the pristine simplicity and creativity of Shombhu Debnath and his daughter, Maya, as a refusal of Balaram's idealism, if not his values. The loom functions as a viable metaphor for Alu's longing for Maya and his mastery over the subtle patterns of weaving including the intricate jamdhani pattern coincides with his winning over the love of Maya which is described in physical and psychological terms. The description of the creative surge of weaving once again defies words and assumes magical incantation:

> So many words, so many things. On a loom a beam's name changes after every inch. Why? Every nail has a name, every twist of rope, every little eyelet, everything of bamboo on the heddle. A loom is a dictionary glossary thesaurus. Why? Words serve no purpose; nothing mechanical. No, it's because the weaver, in making cloth, makes words, too, and trespassing on the territory of the poets gives names to things the eye can't see. That is why the loom has given language more words, more metaphor, more idiom than all the world's armies of penwielders.

Alu's search for a new technique on the loom is reflective of his own search for his moorings. The ironic mode of description employed in this context with peculiar intones of different categories drawn from the objective world serves to underline the delicate 'buti work' Alu, of late, has mastered.

Initially the patterns were sought to be made in the mould of different experiential realities-Bombbuti, Refugees-buti and antiseptic buti but are found wanting and hence rejected. Ultimately, Alu settles for 'Mayabuti.' This passion for weaving remains with him for the rest of his life long after the house of Balaram goes up in flames in which Balaram, Toru-Debi and Maya are supposed to have lost their lives. In al-Ghazira his constant indulgence in weaving compensates for his silence for, the tons and tons of bales he creates speak eloquently on his behalf.

Carbolic acid, functioning as structural dimension and a metaphor, runs through the novel like a cleansing mechanism. Balaram uses it as an effective disinfectant to keep the settlements of the refugees clean and free from dirt, disease and death. It also works as a psychological therapy, as a means of awakening the dormant villagers against the repressive suffocation unleashed by the village strong-man, Bhudeb Roy. Balaram keeps a constant vigil on the drums of carbolic acid which was taken as an act of sedition and extremist activity and hence the police raid. Alu carries on his unde's mission of cleanliness and introduces it in al-Ghazira with renewed vigour. Even there, they were chased for their gospel of physical and psychological purity. In '*Tamas:* Death,' in the little town of El Oued on the north-eastern edge of the Algerian Sahara, carbolic acid is converted into Ganga-jal to purify the corpse of Kulfi. "The world has come full circle," wonders Dr. Mishra in the small desert town.

Sewing machines were initially the passion of Toru-Debi. Her flexible attitude in tune with her passion, is shown in her attempts to bring rapprochment between the rival families. She goes to Bhudeb Roy's house and promises Parboti-Debi seven blouses. Later when Parboti-Debi elopes with Shombhu Debnath and takes shelter in their house, she sees that the end was very near. She could see that Parboti-Debi herself has dealt a mortal blow to the bloated ego of Bhudeb Roy and her fears about the imminent attack by him are expressed in the shrouded caution given to Alu: "Can't you see how serious it is? He's coming and it'll be the end of everything if the blouses aren't ready. Only the sewing machine can save us now. Whatever happens, I'll never let your uncle say that it was because of the blouses."

The sewing machines indeed save the life of Alu when he falls beneath the rubble of the Star. Two sewing machines take away the impact of the fall. Zindi's passion for Durban Tailoring House is necessitated by the need to find an alternative source of income as most of the inmates of her house begin to spend their time at Hajji Fahmy's place carrying out the message given by Alu in letter and spirit. She fails to get the Durban Tailoring House for herself but her instinct for survival is proved right when the law-enforcing authorities pounce on the Ras people about to go on a shopping spree. Even Iyoti Das is drawn to the sewing machines and announces that Alu would find good ones back home.

Life of Pasteur has everything in it associated with Balaram and his rational outlook. Balaram considers Pasteur his model and shapes his life since childhood with scientific temper and rationalistic outlook. But the intrinsic contradiction between the internal and external realities throws his plans out of gear on many an occasion. His one ambition in his childhood was to study science and emulate the great masters of science, Pasteur and Jagadish Bose. But his teachers at Dhaka decide that he was good for the study of history and guide him accordingly to Dr. Radhakrishnan, the teacher of philosophy at Presidency College. His favourite pastime, the study of heads, often lands him in trouble but he does not give it up.

With his uncompromising stand, he slowly gains control over the Rationalists at the Presidency by weaning it away from Gopal who, of course, was to remain his life-long friend. When he was about to make a poinnegarding the Rationalists for the first time in the college, Gopal's sense of foreboding warns him that he was a man who could bring disaster to anyone he is associated with: "As he watched Balaram go, Gopal had a premonition: a premonition of the disaster he would call upon himself and all of them, if ever he is allowed to take charge of the society.

He decided then, with an uncharacteristic determination, that he would do everything in his power to keep that from happening." (His wife also could see that and sets fire to all his books. Alu could retrieve only one book from the flames, *Life of Pasteur.* Balaram's choice of carbolic acid itself has an interesting story.

He could have gone for other brands as well but for the fact that they were created by the 'Great Adversary, Robert Koch, who had so tenaciously and falsely opposed Pasteur's 'and is hence drawn to carbolic acid be-cause it was the 'masterly brain-child of Lister's, Pasteur's friend and Great Disciple.'

Inspired by the biography, Balaram starts a school in his village called 'The School of Reason.' He takes it as an ultimate test to his long-cherished beliefs. Even the normally hostile Toru-Debi consents to train the students in sewing and Shombhu Debnath in weaving. For once, their respective obsessions are turned into instruments of supporting education but "Soon the conflict between Bhudeb Roy and Balaram reaches a crisis point. Yet again *Life of Pasteur* survives the crisis and with Alu it starts its journey to al-Ghazira. It proves its utility even aboard 'Mariamma' as one of its pages is used by Prof. Samuel to save the life of Karthamma. Once again in *'Tamas:* Death' the book is found in the house of Mrs. Verma, the daughter of Hem Narain Mathur, Balaram's friend and classmate at the Presidency. Having found no use in its practical utility Alu offers it to the pyre of Kulfi.

The journey as a motif runs throughout the novel and unites its three parts. Characters cross borders "with almost the biological necessity if not always the ease and nonchalance of migratory birds." This motif is particularly associated with Alu who is on the run having been branded an extremist by the police and with Jyoti Das close on his heels always. He moves from Lalpukur to Kerala and then sets off to al-

Ghazira in the Middle East along with a number of characters who travel in search of material wealth and more opportunities. Travels itself is converted into a homeland. For Jyoti Das, more than the profesional obligations, it was the prospect of seeing more birds on his travels that urges him to move on in his pursuit of Alu. Ironically it was he who causes the journey of Alu once again from al-Ghazira through Alexandria, Egypt, Lisbon, Tunis to the little town of El Oued. He is accompanied by Zindi, Boss and Kulfi, and whenever Zindi says 'We're going West where the sewing machines are' Jyoti Das seems to overhear them for he appears wherever they go.

But by this time Jyoti Das is suspended from his service for his sneaking sympathies with the man whom he chases and now he lands even in El Oued to see more birds, rare vultures and atone for previous lapses. But ironically he is viewed as a vulture by Zindi for, she says, he seems to bring death wherever he goes: "That man carries death with him wherever he goes. He can't help it; it's in his eyes. Think of what happened to Jeevanbhai; think of Karthamma and the rest. And this time he's come with a vulture."

All alone in the desert, 'terrified of the future, without a past, aware of the prickings of his painful virginal flesh,' Jyoti Das is enchanted by Kulfi but even as he starts wooing her when they rehearse for the dance drama, 'Chitrangada,' Kulfi dies of heart attack. The sense of foreboding of Zindi is proved right once again.

Having nothing to fall back in India he sets off to Dusseldorf in Germany to stay with his engineer uncle. When he is informed that Alu and Zindi were moving to Tangier on their way back home he could visualize a sky beaming with different birds over Tangier: a sky alive with "Cory's shearwaters and honey buzzards, white storks and steppe eagles." He takes the permission of the suspecting Zindi to accompany them upto Tangier: "I'm migrating myself to Dusseldorf. I've got nowhere else to go. Can I come with you, too."

While for Jyoti Das his past and future were "continents of defeat-defeat at home, defeat in the world" for Alu the world has come full circle as he settles down to wait for Virat Singh and the ship that would carry them home; despite his hopeful travels on previous occasions, for him, "Hope is the beginning" yet again even at the end of the story.

13

A Voice among Bullet Holes: *The Circle of Reason*

Sometimes from a double-decker bus you could see a whole refugee bustee encircled by gun-totting C.R.P. uniforms. Distant cries could be heard, but only vaguely, as they shaded into the hard pop music reccohetting off dangling transistor sets. It was simply another day in Calcutta of the early 70s. There were also evenings when your elders told you of *sonar bangla* of a wealth of fish and land which dissolved in the nightmare of flots, war and exile. And the story continues, unfolding in everyday sights and headlines: the Nellie massacre burnt houses which once belonged to Sikhs in Delhi, labour contractors leading a flock of rural poor from Orissa to Kashmir, proposals for a boundary wall on the Bangladesh border .... The history of our subcontinent, especially of its northern part, has never been able to take its continuities and culture for granted. A life of constant movement and violence has incessantly serrated our roots.

It is not often that we choose to acknowledge the restlessness of our lives. When we do, as in Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* it is seen simply, as a dislocation from settled childhood. Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason* presents a much more challenging appreciation. It combines within itself an uncompromising restlessness with a poise and control that suggests peace rather than longing. This is remarkable, for really *The Circle* offers nothing which we would normally call home. Initially located in a refugee village, the story refers back to Bangladesh and Calcutta, finally moving to the Middle East via Kerala where it reaches its denouement in a desert of shifting sand-dunes. And all the while it travels through environments which are never entirely rural or urban. Nor do its ideas provide a stable attitude. Each idea evolves from the story, posing a challenge to the preceding and is itself qualified by a succeeding understanding. Even a basic element like Time is not uniformly patterned. *The Circle* is an epic of restlessness. And yet, the calm....

Science, philosophy, history, politics, culture, art, language, the joy of living, the despair of repeated loss-these are only some of the strands which make the scope of this novel fairly formidable. And like a conjurer, its restless energy provides at each moment and at all levels, a fresh disclosure. The love of the story, for instance. The novel provides not one, but many stories, each equally appealing and important. Basically there are three stories knitted around three characters.

The first part unfolds the story of Balaram, a nationalist entranced by the *Life of Pasteur.* His obsessive idealism leads him to treat people as objects, either of observation or of change; a trait which makes him self-destructive as he gets entangled with his alter ego, Bhudeb, a Congressman, who though motivated by cynical considerations looks at people in the same way as Balaram. The second part revolves around Zindi, the earthy, practical, zestful trader whose presence brings together a community of Indians in the Middle East. The second part moves forward through Alu, the nephew and only survivor of Balaram's family. He brings his community to death and destruction by his attempts to create a co-operative community which tries to dispense with money and trade. Finally, the third part structures itself around Mrs. Verma, who in defiance of all rational scepticism, creates in the desert an oasis of Indian community life. The novel, however, moves on as Alu, Zindi and Jyoti Das (a police officer who tracks Alu from the first part, having taken him for an extremist) finally leave Mr. Verma and the desert, bound for destinations which are to be discovered through hope. The main source of continuity is the story of Alu and Das, which is structured on the thriller format, and talks of a relationship which, being based on officialdom and oppressive power, cannot acknowledge its human connections.

A large part of the pleasure in reading this novel is the immense fertility and zest with which it tells stories. Around the bare outlines of the plot which moves over continents, are clustered an infinite number of stories ranging back and forth in time. *The Circle* is specifically a contemporary work. One of the main sources of the freshness of writers like Marquez and Llosa is their genius for story-telling, a facility that has created new possibilities for the novel, while making serious reading a pleasurable, accessible and popular experience again.

The way Ghosh tells stories, makes story-telling itself a way of looking at the world. By letting his stories interplay with time for instance, Ghosh achieves a fairly original synthesis of two different concepts of time. Generally novelists tend to stick either to a chronological narrative or dissolve time into a kind of duration where past and present are indistinguishable.

Ghosh chooses to engage in a different, more subtle adventure. The novel starts in the past with Balaram's excitement at exploring the shape of Alu's skull, moves further back in time to Balaram with his friends, all in their mid-thirties, returns to Balaram's relationship with Alu, moves forward to the present with Inspector Das interviewing Gopal, a friend of Balaram and then slips back to the beginnings of Balaram's life and career in Presidency College. Each story unfolds in linear time. Much like the phrases in a *raga,* each maintains its distinctiveness. And like a *raga,* the theme and concerns of the novelist weave them together in a single flowing texture. Each story, whether it moves backwards or forwards in time, continues and explicates the previous one. The final experience is an extraordinary achievement in which past and present coexist while constantly asserting their difference.

But Ghosh does not rest here. In fact *The Circle* does not have a single conception of time. Or rather, it explores the many possibilities offered by its general idea of time. In the second section Ghosh traces a different relationship between the past and present. This shift has nothing gratuitous about it, for the difference flows from the thematic de-sign. In keeping with the tone of vibrant and spontaneous involvement with living (exemplified in Zindi), the distinction between the past and present is emphasized in the second part. While offering the Daman-houri story as a possible interpretation of the star episode, Abu Fahl never loses sight of the fact that the tale he tells is from the past. On the other hand, precisely because the first part is built around Balaram who belongs to the past, the aspect of co-existing time dominates to bring this whole section close to the structure of memory.

The story does not stop even here. A delicate network weaves connections between different phenomena, and removes any claim to absolute autonomy which they may generate. While the overall design pat-terns time, in its turn the arrangement of time moulds history. *The Circle* presents history as a collective memory embodying a symbiotic relationship between past and present. The past, a reference point for understanding what is happening now, is equally dependent on the present which determines how we look at it. Dantu, Balaram's friend, a secondary character in the first part, surfaces again as Hem Narain Mathur, a crucial presence in the third section, for the immediate concerns of this part demand a greater attention to his history. The mobility with which history traverses past and present is indeed due to the fluid pattern of time; yet time, with the poise and flavour of oral recapitulation coupled with chronological references, never lets us forget that history is situated in the past.

The perception of history evolves from the novel, and Ghosh never attempts to bulldoze history into some other preoccupation. History retains its historicity, as a process which hinges on characters who are representative of important historical tendencies-whether it is Balaram the idealist bhadralok, or Bhudeb the lumpen Congressman who unnervingly talks of mass media and straight lines, or even Damanhouri the one-eyed fantasy of the fledgling bourgeoisie. What does happen however, is that history is refracted through different mediums: in the first part through ideas on science and change, and in the second section, through the Damanhouri story, as a narrative from which earthy lessons are to be drawn. The difference in historical understanding corresponds to the distinction between an intellectually cosmopolitan culture and a more rural one. Being memory, history is fashioned by the way people collectively look at their inheritance. It is subject to culture.

What we have here is a novel that organizes by exploring connections, distinctions and possibilities, rather than putting everything together in a symmetrical design. Each aspect of *The Circle* is gathered into a process of constant change. And despite its formidable array of interests, it never stumbles into chaos. Everything is seen in relation-ship, both internally and with other areas, being dependent finally on the way the novelist looks at life. The balance *The Circle* achieves through this, creates also an original possibility for the novel itself. By disallowing absolutes, Ghosh is able to break free from the constraints of conventional realism. At the same time, because of the ability to acknowledge the separateness of each area marks many a modernist novel. *The Circle* flourishes in the new space opened up by writers like Marquez, where the style organizes by synthesizing collectively acknowledged categories of reality with the logic and metaphors of the artist's imagination.

But it is not enough to say that Ghosh follows in the wake of these writers. His novel also creates a new style, one which is less lyricized, more responsive to the specificity and multifacetedness of experience while evincing a constant intellectual curiosity about the life it unfolds. It is this style which provides a rest in the swirling restlessness and violence that pervade the theme and action of the novel for above all, what *The Circle* seems to say to that if there is a home, then it is to be found in the way we perceive and relate to our world. The calm that is affirmed here has within it a great deal of humanism, for through it *The Circle* is able to avoid the obsession with fragmentation and helplessness that has gripped so much of western art.

Equally important is its immediate relevance. The novel has made its appearance at a time when our country seems to be headed towards one of the goriest chapters of its restless existence. Already the battle lines are being drawn. On one hand the discontinuities within our heritage are increasingly being interpreted as negation of any linkages within that tradition. On the other hand the dominant tradition is coming to regard itself as the only legitimate source of our complex culture. The alternatives recall the memory of two terrible possibilities: 1947 and Biafra. The importance of *The Circle* lies in living another process, one which suggests that any relationship must rest on a dynamic and sensitive grappling with similarities and differences and to acknowledge this, given our immediate challenges, would be to explore and create the wholeness immeasurably richer than any narrow nationalist cliche.

Ultimately of course, the seriousness of Ghosh's understanding springs from the fact that it is not easily acquired. *The Circle* takes a lot of beating, tracing a repeated pattern of achievement and loss. In all three parts the novel finds patches of settled community life. Each part is a tale of attempts to better society, efforts (except with qualifications, the law section) which flame into destruction and exile. Yet the novel does not slip into cynicism. The way it looks at its stories ensures that the urge to mould a better life remains undefeated. The style of *The Circle* the location of its 'home,' also gives it hope.

This hope is important for *The Circle* leads us into a universe which is spectacularly destructive. Even a suicide burns down fifty houses. And Ghosh never lets us find comfort in categorizing these events as 'literary' metaphors. Metaphoric they may be, but then the whole novel *lives* this large, metaphoric existence. The characters too-whether it is Balaram with his carbolic acid, or Zindi frantically trying to buy a shop-becomes metaphoric by the sheer intensity of their obsessions. The metaphor then is not a matter of presentation; it articulates the urgency which the vulnerability of human understanding and life generate in the novel. The fate of whole cultures is involved. The flames of the known world which Alu looks on at the end of part one, are also the flames of positivism which have dominated not merely western but a great deal of international thought. The importance of the issues involved make the metaphors in *The Circle* a grim prophecy.

However the novel is too assertive of life to make the kind of statement which says that the fate of humanity is inevitable. Its prophecy warns rather than dictates. By displaying life lived at its fullest, it always communicates a sense of alternate possibilities. And in an age that has got accustomed to the prospect of annihilation, this is no small achievement. Nor is it easy to grasp the centrality of human choice, which itself assumes that in any given situation many choices are possible. It liberates the relentless logic of Balaram's actions from any sense of fatalism, and makes it a humanist protest against the myopia of idealistic convictions. For Balaram's inhumanity is inherent in the way he looks at people. By denying people their status as living beings, Balaram has already courted death. Yet the intensity of Balaram's belief and the love with which Ghosh draws his character, makes the cruelty of his destructive absurdities seem directed more at himself, than at others.

The novel speaks again of the old tragic anguish, of the fullness of human life and the blindness that destroys it. But then *The Circle* is also an epic novel. Though Balaram's death may be an important moment, it is, after all, only a moment in the course of the novel. Unlike Golding and a host of western authors, Ghosh is able to avoid fetishizing destruction. It is not death which gives meaning to life. On the contrary, by showing life as a journey larger than death, *The Circle* makes death find its identity in the horror and sadness which embalms this process.

The vision of life as a process transforms the restless world of the novel. Restlessness loses its meaning as displacement or instability. It becomes, in Ghosh's hands, a dynamic urge to find a complete relation-ship with the rich diversity of our world, which is achieved in the organization of the novel. The position, however, can never be final, for by acknowledging the supremacy of life, it has to subject itself to the rush of experience. The world of cotton-weaving, for instance, is initially projected as an alternate ethos to Balaram's universe epitomized in phrenology. Cotton brings together language, art, work, love, giving its practitioners a lively connection with the world. And yet it is pathetic, for the world to which it belonged is gone. Unable to comprehend the new violent world, the language of Jamdani is torn by commerce and destruction until all that is left is Alu's ten fingers to serve as a reminder of what was possible, and a hope that this possibility would be the basis of a fresh, comprehensive language.

The many achievements of the novel make the last part somewhat disappointing. It fails to live the earlier fullness of experience. There is something forced here; the meticulous detail with which the deserts of Arabia are Indianized gives the feeling that a thesis is being imported. In any case, in the light of what had been done, is the search for an obvious resolution necessary? True, the novel leaves Mrs. Verma behind. But the fact remains tha' she is not questioned at all. By centering the last section on a clearcut-confrontation between Dr. Mishra, the cynical nationalist, and Mrs. Verma, the organic innovator, Ghosh seems to deliberately schematize the structure, so that Mrs. Verma is glorified at the expense of her rival. It is not then as if Mrs. Verma's life is simply one of the many possibilities offered in the novel. It has a larger significance, one that is made to hold hopes of regeneration.

The seriousness of Mrs. Verma's depiction poses serious problems for the approach to the novel. Shadowing her portrait is a danger and a silence, that vitiates much of the wholeness of the novel. The danger lies in the way Mrs. Verma self-consciously creates an oasis of Hindu culture. In a multi-religious and multi-cultural country like ours, this does seem a brittle short-cut to home.

For while the obvious point is that religion cannot be completely severed from a culture, the equally important and more interesting problem is to approach the process evolving from the relationship between different cultures. Continuities must be found in the present, and not only recovered from the past. Otherwise Mrs. Verma's efforts-especially at a time when communalism beckons threateningly can easily be construed as an expression of Hindu zeal. More so, because it leaves a silent space which can only be filled by the denseness of uncritical belief. This area is formed by the tangential view of social change. Mrs. Verma's idea of change rests on a personal recovery of tradition, rather than on making society as a whole more human, a problem which was raised through both Balaram and Alu.

Their answers may have been flawed, but the questions they raised, remain. What does one do with the cynicism of Bhudeb, or the inhuman onrush of colonial-ism shown so vividly in the Damanhouri story? No doubt Ghosh has made an effort to tackle the problem through the figure of Hem Mathur. But the thematic relationship between Mrs. Verma and her Lohatie father does not seem convincing; nor does the celebration of Mathur, whose qualities concern personal integrity and proximity to the oppressed, fully challenge the problem.

However, it is not as if the third section denies altogether the possibilities created in the preceding portion. Ghosh is far too talented a writer to leave us with less than an ambiguous effect, even at his weakest. Despite the liveliness, intelligence, poignancy and zest for affirmation of the third part, the problem remains serious precisely because of the importance of the novel as a whole. And they are not problems with easy solutions, for they have yet to be resolved by our understanding, action and process of living. In brief it is this: the problem of human survival has become dependent on finding the connection between a full conception of relationship and of social change. The problems of our country are also what we share with the rest of the world. For the growing internationalization of the world has, by throwing different cultures and societies together, emphasized their distinctions.

How can we prevent these distinctions from becoming antagonistic to a point of no return? And can this be done by simply appreciating distinctions, or does it need a different social perception, which proceeds not by exclusion, but dialectically? *The Circle* provides a direction, a hope and a problem. Need we expect more from a work of art?

14

Shadow Lines: Cross-Cultural Perspectives In the Fiction of Amitav Ghosh

The novel is the only developing genre and therefore it reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself m the process of its unfolding. Only that which is itself developing can comprehend development as process. The novel has become the leading hero in the literary development of our time precisely because it best of all reflects the tendencies of a new world still in the making; it is, after all, the only genre born of this new world and in total affinity with it.

Bakhtin was writing in a European context, but could have been addressing with even sharper relevance that of new literatures m English. Bakhtin identified the novel as the "open ended" literary form of the modem age, reflecting and bringing together many languages ("heteroglossia"). These languages are not simply linguistic, but socio-ideological" idioms and forms voices from different strata of cultural experience.

Amitav Ghosh's work introduces a number of "languages," including those of the Indian folk-tale, the *Mahabharata*, journalism, and the memory patterns of the extended family, radically deconstructing traditional novel forms. In a genre associated in Europe with "realism" Ghosh explores Vedic concepts of Maya (illusion) and transcendence to question the possibility (of Western realism. In the opening section of *The, Circle of Reason*, the village capitalist, Bhudeb Roy, organizes a festival to Saraswati which Ghosh identifies rather loosely as "the Hindu Goddess of Learning." He has a six-foot image built, with spinning electric lights behind the eyes and a silver-foil halo. During the ceremony the rationalist Balaram leaps onto the platform with defiling sandals and tears off the dyed cotton hair, revealing the clay underneath. "This is not Saraswati, Learning," he cries to the electrified crowd "it is Vanity." At a deep level, the image of Saraswati *is* "Vanity," for in the Vedic tradition she is a feminine principle and aspect of nature, and only becomes "knowledge" in flowing through the enlightened devotee-Bhudeb Roy is certainly not enlightened.

But Balaram is equally benighted-he "exposes" the image not because this misrepresents the tradition, but because it does not represent his concept of Westernized rationalism.

Towards the end of the book there is another festival, the reenactment of Chitrangada's appearance to Arjuna. In the story, taken from the *Mahabharata* via Tagore, the warrior princess Chitrangada is granted the gift of physical beauty for a year in order to attract Arjuna. She becomes his lover, but Arjuna, not knowing the transformation, is drawn by hear-say to Chitrangada's other self. After the year, Arjuna sees her without her beauty, and understands the illusion of the physical. The two episodes are alike and yet opposites. In the first, a religious image is unmasked, showing the crude substance beneath; in the second, physical reality is dissipated to reveal the spiritual.

In both, the real significance of the ritual has been missed. In the first, traditional belief has been prostituted as a means of publicity by the grossly materialistic Bhudeb Roy; in the second, the original legend has been sentimentalized by Tagore and is being played on a gramophone record, in a language the participants cannot understand, in an alien country. Chitrangada is being played by a prostitute, Kulfi. This does and does not invalidate the myths. Misused and misunderstood, the two episodes do have a meaning-the first in the cycle of conflict within which Alu begins his quest for a higher meaning; the second, in the movement that redeems Kulfi (who is given a full ritual burial), and turns Alu back to India. Only through illusion can truth be found.

The concern with the cyclical process of the activity of life underpins the whole book. Reality is Maya, illusion, but only through Maya can reality be understood. The three sections of the novel follow the three Vedic Gunas-Sattva, Rajas and Tamas, the three aspects of nature ('prakriti') without which no action is possible, taking the development from rising awareness of "Reason," through "Passion," to "Death" or entropy. The process also brings together the divergent stylistic levels of the book-that of an exuberant folk-tale, of the emergence of a human community, and the dialectic between Indian and European consciousness in an alien predicament.

The opening sections focus on a village near the future India-Pakistan border, where Balaram embodies the impact of nineteenth-century scientific reason on India. For Balaram, the modern age began with Pasteur's development of disinfectant and innoculation, and Madame Curie's experiments with radiation to control cancer cells. With these scientific discoveries Balaram believes superstition and ignorance were done away, and the scientific basis of life established. Armed with this knowledge he wages a heroic war against the corrupt commercialism of his archenemy, Bhudeb Roy. Yet the inadequacy of this view is hilariously underlined by Balaram's attempt to answer all problems, including war, with buckets of carbolic acid.

Indeed Balaram's concepts of the "new science" were already out of date, Curie and Pasteur being both creators of a new consciousness and the inheritors of the old. Again Ghosh complicates the issue. For Balaram's reliance on a nineteenth-century pseudo-science, Phrenology, in fact approximates to the Indian "superstition" of popular religion and astrology that he opposes. His search for a new Western vision of reality, reflected in the chapter titled "a Pasteurised universe," brings to mind the Vedic legend of the creation of the world, in which the milk ocean of creation was churned by the gods and demons using a snake to separate the poison from the "amrit" (ambrosia). Shiva drank the poison, purifying (pasteurising) the universe. However the outcome was that only the gods drank the "Amrit": Ghosh suggests Balaram also has a one-sided strategy.

Into the story comes Alu, his name, literally "potato." Alu gains his name because his head, of such interest to Balaram, is lumpy like a spud. But Alu, who emerges as the real hero of the book, is also basic, unlovely but ever-renewed, a child of the folk, a creature of the earth. While Balaram pursues his intellectual war against Bhudeb Roy in a landscape scarificed by the internecine India-Pakistan conflict, Alu becomes a master-weaver. Weaving is a central image of the book, bringing together its many paradoxes and opposites.

A craft, using the cotton indigenous to India from prehistoric times, it is a paradigm Indian culture. Yet as a mechanical process, it embodies the commercial exploitation that undermine all human societies. "When the history of the world broke, cotton and cloth were behind it; mechanical man in pursuit of his own destruction ... millions of African and half of America were enslaved by cotton."

When a misdirected flare ignites Balaram's defensive arsenal, Alu escapes with a sewing machine and Balaram's *Life of Pasteur*. Pursued south to Kerala by the police detective *Jyoti* Das, who becomes a figure of death as the book progresses, Alu crosses the Indian ocean to the imaginary Gulf State of Al-Ghazira with a boatload of Indian women, destined for the town's brothels by Zindi. Sexual, predatory and physically dominating, Zindi is an ambivalent figure of womanhood whose machinations continue whatever quest idealism may pursue. Al-Ghazira is an oil state, a chaotic meeting of the traditional folk, the old tyranny of the Emirs, and the Western pressures of colonial administration and post-colonial exploitation.

A huge economic centre has risen in the desert as a monument to a progress no one wants: when it collapses, Alu is buried in the dead-centre, the rubble arrested by a fallen beam inches from his nose. When he emerges after days of meditation, it is with the inspiration that money, not germs, are destroying civilization. The vision is as flawed as that of Balaram, and when the revolutionary society led by Abu Fahl is crushed by the state, it is with Zindi, Kulfi (an inmate of Zindi's brothel) and an orphan child called Boss that Alu escapes. Following in reverse the routes by which European culture travelled to India, they· reach Tunisia, chosen by Ghosh as an instance of a political integration of European and African cultures. Here the trio meet up with an expatriate Indian doctor, Dr. Verma.

The "circle" is closing. For if Balaram came to his vision of reason through biology, attacking deviant microbes with his panacea of carbolic acid, Dr. Verma comes to a Hindu reverence of life also from a basic in microbiology. Dr. Verma even has a *Life of Pasteur*. In it she points out to Alu that the germ both brings death and makes the possibility of life. "It says without the germ 'life would be impossible because death would be incomplete.'

It is Dr. Verma who organizes a dramatic reenactment of the play by Tagore, already mentioned, where the princess Chitrangada, returned to her plain appearance, is seen in her essence by Arjuna. Dr. Verma has to take what Indian actors she can find, and as noted above, when the scene is enacted, within the costumes Kuill the prostitute takes the part of Chitrangada, while the warrior Arjuna is played by the police agent Jyoti Das. Kulfi expresses a moment of intense sexual desire and crashes to the ground, clutching her heart, dead.

"Heavenly. Her fathers have gathered her to their heavenly abode" intones Dr. Verma, dressed as Madana, the God of Love. The cycle of death and regeneration is almost complete. After Alu has gone to great lengths to give Kuill a proper Indian burial, he is told by Dr. Verma that this will give him a reason for going home, and the book ends with

Alu, Boss and Zindi, turning back towards India, while the death-bearing *Jyoti* Das looks towards Europe.

The Circle of Reason is an extraordinarily accomplished first novel. It combines wit, intelligence and creative innovation to explore new possibilities for the novel form in the Indian context. Yet it is not wholly successful. The different narrative strategies pull apart, and the substructure, of knowledge working its way through the stages of the three Gunas, does not sufficiently unite the divergent sections. Moreover the work suffers from being *too* complex for its imaginatite integrity: at times one becomes aware of Ghosh's manipulation.

In *The Shadow Lines,* Ghosh finds a sharper unifying focus. The novel brings together the forms of the autobiographical novel and the family chronicle, to subvert both. "I am born" begins Dickens' *David Copperfield*. "In 1939, thirteen years before I was born," begins *The Shadow Lines.* Ghosh's novel introduces a family "tree," but it is not the legally-defined family of European society, of Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga* or Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks-rather,* it is the Asian extended family of loyalties, affections and associations. This becomes so complex that even the narrator confesses confusion and the novel is to some extent about the meaning of family relationships in a distintegrating world. "Shadow Lines" of the title refers both to lines of separation, and the invisible links which bind.

There are several lines of family introduced-that of the narrator, based in Calcutta; that of his grandmother's sister, associated with Dhaka, and two further lines bringing into the story Robi and Ila. But the blood relationships merge with those forged by intimacy, as with the British family, linked through domicile in India, of Lionel Tresawsen. The narrator's closest links are with Mayadebi, his grandmother's sister, and with her sori Tridib, the enigmatic older friend through which the "I" narrator experiences much of his life.

For if *Circle of Reason* is about "Knowledge," *Shadow Lines* is about "Knowing." The novel moves through an intricate weaving back-wards and forwards in time. Narrative sequence is constantly frustrated by the intrusion of memory-memory working not, as in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, as a stream-of-consciousness, so much as remembered family histories, restructured in a search for meaning. Memories sharpen into focus, then blur: "Although I cannot remember when it happened any more than I can remember when I first learnt to tell the time or tie my shoelaces." "I don't know, I can't tell: that world is closed to me, shut off by too many years spent away." Can we ever be sure? One of the most vivid episodes in the novel, a sexual encounter in a bombed theatre, is related by Tridib to May and so taken at third hand by the narrator.

But even Tridib cannot be certain of how far his memory has been accurate: "he didn't know whether it had really happened or he had imagined it." Yet this does not invalidate memory. "Reality" for its own sake does not have any specific truth." Ila who claims to be "objective" remembers the cities she has visited by the airport lavatories. Tridib gives meaning to his experience through his imagination, but not wilfully. He teaches the narrator to "use his imagination with precision."

Not that the ostensibly "practical" lla is free from illusion. One of the recurrent motifs in the book is the mental creation of a house from another, secret, place-a vivid expression of the relationship between real and imagined "homes." Arriving in the Tresawsen's house in London, the narrator knows the position of every room. This is because when a child he had been taken to hide in a cellar below Ila's family home in Dhaka, where they had "played houses." Ila had traced out for him an imaginary house, which we discover is identical in form to the London house where Ila had spent her childhood. In the cellar, as they play at having a family, it becomes clear their doll child represents the earlier Ila. Yet the doll is blue-eyed and flaxen-haired, befriended and protected by the son of the house, Nick Price. In reality Ila was dark, and Nick deserted her: Ila's underground imagination evades reality rather than clarifying it.

The novel gains stature by placing the individual themes starkly in a contemporary context. The shadow lines divide and link peoples and nations. The novel takes place largely on the newly-created Indo-Pakistan border which divides the family and its past. What is this border? Flying over it, the grandmother expects to see some sign. The father laughs-no, it will not be a long black line with green on one side and scarlet on the other. But the grandmother's question is a serious one. If there are no physical signs, where is the difference? Why cannot people as in the past travel from Dhaka to Calcutta without anyone stopping them? What are the 'shadow lines'?

Their dual meaning emerges in the final sections of the book when the grandmothers discover a relative, turning senile, left behind in a hostile Dhaka. They go to rescue him-with Robi, May and Tridib. He is trying to escape from the mob when May and Tridib run to his rescue, May is protected by being English, but Tridib, throwing himself to his own death, drawn by the 'shadow line' of imaginative sympathy. Why he should do it is the mystery left by the book. As May says, "He gave himself up; it was a sacrifice. I know I can't understand it. I know I mustn't try, for any real sacrifice is a mystery."

The profoundly personal ending of the book is different indeed in tone to that of Ghosh's first novel. But both end with a ritual, a religious intimation of the cycle and continuation of life. Ghosh's work to-date extends the scope of the novel, not only within its own narrative, but moving outward and beyond the strategies of words, to an exploration of the past and the future of the culture he has inherited.

15

The Shadow Lines: A Quest for Indivisible Sanity

The novel is not required-even assuming the task is within the realm of possibility-to describe the specific historical forms of a society: that is not where the truth lies. Nor of course is it a matter of saying that the author's ideas are necessarily correct. But literature is always an attempt to reveal to us "an unknown side of human existence," as Kundera says somewhere, and thus although it has no privileged access to truth, it never stops searching for it.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* is one of the most readable and least frivolous of the recent Indian novels in English. An effective fiction it emanates from a particular historical moment which intersects the narrator and the nation at a crucial point of their evolution and growth. While capturing the high points of the historical moment in credible and efficient narrative action, the novel eventuates into a search for the vibrant concerns essential for the survival of central strength and sanity in society. The novel is rich in signifying transactions that do not depend for their effect on "solid slabs of continuous experience" but on the potentiality of materiality marshalled by the author to anchor his perception of reality. It quickens our conscience and triggers our response to the mingled frenzy of violence, idealism, passion and intrigue that has amputated the narrator's intimate history and geography. By skilfully manipulating the narrator's developing sociological consciousness and his interaction with multicultural representatives in a fictional construct. Ghosh makes his novel a supple medium of sophisticated comment on current realities. Although the situations are bound by their historical and geographical co-ordinates they enlarge the spatial and temporal axes and offer a melange of insights into a kind of 'reality' that can sustain inter-personal bond across cultural boundaries and contain the threats flowing from the ab-surdities of borders and frontiers.

The novel tells the story of the three generations of the narrator's family spread over Dhaka, Calcutta and London and lines up characters from different nationalities, religions and cultures in a close-knit, palpable fictive world. Written against the backdrop of the civil strife in post-partition East Bengal and riot-hit Calcutta, the events revolving around itinerant Mayadebi's family, their friendship and sojourn with their English friends, the Prices, Tha'mma, the narrator's great mother, ties with Dhaka and the later wrench from her roots, spontaneous communal combustion in 1964 in Dhaka claiming the lives of Jethamoshai, Khalil and Tridib pose the challenge of intercultural understanding and friendship in contemporary society divided by arbitrary demarcations of national boundaries.

The narrator's mnemonic fund' is enriched by his uncle and mentor, Tridib, who lets him in on the creative powers of memory and imagination. On one hand is the narrator's family consisting of his grandmother, Mayadebi's elder sister, and his parents; on the other are Mayadebi, her husband, a diplomat, and their three sons, Jatin, an economist with the UN, Tridib and Robi. Jatin's daughter, Ila, is always away with her parents.

While the narrator's family is settled in Calcutta where his grandmother is a schoolmistress, Mayadebi's family except Tridib keeps on going around the world. Tridib, who lives in his ancestral house in Ballygunge place, is seen at a loose end at Gole Park among his *adda* acquaintances. Stay in close vicinity brings the narrator and his uncle Tridib together, although much to the dislike of Tha'mma, who is stern middle-class matriarch.

Tridib saw·May Price as a little baby when he went to England with his parents in 1939. The friendship between the families began when Mrs. Price's father, Lionel Tresawsen, and Tridib's grandfather, Mr. Justice Chandrashekhara Datta-Chaudhury, met in Calcutta at seances. By the time Tridib meets May in India in 1962, their friendship through correspondence since 1959 has ripened into love. The narrator who is Ila's age and is drawn to her apparently liberated charms loses his chance to Nick Price, May's younger brother. It is May-Tridib relationship which is central to the thematic concerns of the novel. The narrator's close interaction with May who accompanied Tha'mma, Mayadebi and Tridib to bring his grandmother's uncle, Jethamoshai, from Dhaka to Calcutta and was witness to the killing of Tridib, is the most moving part of the novel.

The narrator recalls his meeting with May at crucial point in the chronology of the novel: "I met May Price for the first time two years after that incident, when she came to Calcutta on a visit. The next time I met her was seventeen years later, when I went to London myself." The stretch of history during these seventeen years between 1962 and 1979 is the effective background of the novel against which the author evokes postcolonial situations, cultural dislocations and anxieties, and interprets the issues of fractured nationalities in close and telling encounters.

The historical baggage shouldered by the novel includes the freedom movement in Bengal, the Second World War, the partition of India and the miasma of communal hatred breaking out into riots in East Pakistan (now Bangla Desh) following the Hazratbal incident in Srinagar in 1964. The novel is not a recapitulation of these historical upheavals; it catches alive the trauma of emotional rupture and choked human relations as also the damaging potential of the siege within people sundered by politics. The materiality of Ghosh's novel constituted by the web of material relations at a certain time in a certain location binds the narratives and authenticates the nexus between the historical moment and the fictive world. The reconstruction of the past through houses, photographs, maps, road names, newspapers, advertisements and other concretizations allows the reader to examine the text with diverse cotexts and validate the author's perception of the time and milieu covered by the novel. A close look at the principal episodes with reference to their historicity and materiality is significantly revealing in that the author's insight into the issues troubling the consciousness of characters can be identified and gleaned. "In *The Shadow Lines,*" writes Nivedita Bagchi, "the very materiality of objects plays a vital role in validating the narrative. Tridib, we are told, is an archaeologist, and the chief narrator is a history research fellow. The importance of material objects to the archaeological-historian for validation of oral narratives, for dating and establishing chronology in the reconstruction of history, cannot be over-stated."

The looping, non-linear progression of the narratives underpinned by the narrator and the historical sweep entail active and alert audience participation. In the opening lines, the narrator refers to his grandmother's sister's visit to England and establishes the narrative framework: "In 1993, thirteen years before I was born, my father's aunt, Mayadebi, went to England with her husband and her son, Tridib." (9) We gather that Mayadebi was born in 1910 and Tridib in 1931. The novel also telescopes the political ferment in Bengal and the upbringing of Tha'mma, who was born in 1902, and Mayadebi in the revolutionary decades of the present century. As soon as we infer the details of Mayadebi's visit to England, the narrative shifts to 1960 when Tridib first shared his experience of London with the narrator:

> Over the years, although I cannot remember when it happened any more than I can remember when I first learnt to tell the time or tie my shoelaces, I have come to believe that I was eight too when Tridib first talked to me about that journey. I remember trying very hard to

> imagine him back to my age, to reduce his height to mine, and to think away the spectacles that were so much a part of him that I really believed he had been born with them. It wasn't easy, for to me he looked old, and I could not remember him looking anything other than old-though, in fact, at that time he could not have been much older than twenty-nine. In the end, since I had nothing to go on, I had decided that he had looked like me.

Thus the narrative spills back and forth but all the episodes are held in simultaneous focus nonetheless to illuminate the major burden of the novel.

Chronologically, the story begins with a passage of time in colonial India when the narrator was not born. The year 1939 is historically significant for the outbreak of the second world war and phenomenal changes caused by that agonizing epochal event. Mayadebi's visit to London around this time, her warm and consequential contact with the Price family and Tridib-May component of the story is recounted by Tridib to the narrator twenty-one years later when the latter is an eight year-old inquisitive child. Although May was a little baby when Tridib saw her in London-and they have not met since then-a romantic relationship develops through correspondence between them, transcending the shadow lines of nationality and cultural boundary. Amitav Ghosh explores the mysterious pull between Tridib and May and the abiding intimacy between the two families, when the countries were pitted against each other.

This search for invisible links ranging across the realities of nationality, cultural segregation and racial discrimination is the central theme of *The Shadow Lines*. The author questions the validity of geographical boundaries and celebrates the union of aliens pulled together by self-propelling empathy and attachment. Tresawsen and Mayadebi, Tridib and May, Jethamoshai and Khalil rise above the prevailing passion of war, hatred and communal bad blood and vindicate the political logic of partition and border demarcation to define national and cultural particularities. Ghosh's maturer view of reality was missed glaringly by Bruce King in his review of *In an Antique Land* in *World Literature Today.* The reviewer notes: "Amitav Ghosh's novels *The Circle of Reason* and *The Shadow Lines* are somewhat difficult to place on the current literary map; they have an unusual perspective and cover unexpected territory.

In an Antique Land fills in some of the picture of how Ghosh sees the world and, besides the interest of the book itself as social anthropology and what it tells us about Ghosh, might be a starting place for future discussion of his fiction." Without questioning the merit of *In an Antique Land,* the present writer differs with Bruce King's comments on *The Shadow Lines* in that the latter, as a seminal piece of fiction, does bring out the rare and remarkable talent of Ghosh who passionately searches for strategies for survival in a violent, hate filled world of narrow divisions and finds in love the enabling and productive action to tide over separatist propensities of communities and nationality groups.

The novel addresses the challenge of geographical fluidity and cultural dislocations with a new consciousness and firm grasp of socio-cultural and historical material. The experience of aliens and immigrants in postcolonial setting furnish us with the clue to the novel's larger project of cultural assimilation, friendship across borders and adjustment with the altered face of the world. The theme is first sounded when in a conversation with the narrator in London in 1978 May Price shares her growing intimacy with Tridib:

Smiling at the memory, she told me how his card had reached her just when she was trying to get over an adolescent crush on a schoolboy trombonist, who had had no time for her at all and had not been overly delicate about making that clear. It was nice to feel that someone wanted to befriend her. She had written back, and after that they had written to each other; regularly-short, chatty letters, usually. Soon, pen-friendship, they had exchanged photographs.

The narrator recalls that Tridib's made-up story of his English relatives through marriage recounted to his *adda* acquaintances at Gold Park around 1960 sprang from his passionate longing for May:

> Where have you been all this while Tridib-da! somebody said. It must be three or four months ....
>
> I've been away, I heard him say, and nodded secretly to myself.
>
> Away! Where!
>
> I've been to London, he said. To visit my relatives. His face was grave, his voice steady.
>
> What relatives!
>
> I have English relatives through marriage, he said. A family called Price. I thought I'd go and visit them.
>
> Ignoring their grunts, he told them that he had been to stay with old Mrs. Price, who was a widow. Her husband had died recently. She lived in north London, he said, on a street called Lymington Road; the number of their house was 44 and the tube station was West Hampstead. Mrs. Price had a daughter, who was called May.

Tridib realizes May concretely and warmly in his imagination with all the attendant excitement stored in his senses. He can visualize her shape and appearance precisely even without meeting her. Their love has instrinsic reality; it crosses all borderlines and shadow-lines. The narrator also owes his broadened horizons to Tridib's influence. He has become an imaginative traveller of distant locations beyond the limits of his mind and experience at a fairly young age. He is verily enamoured of the Tridib who had pushed him to "imagine the roofs of Colombo" for himself and "had said that we could not see without inventing what we saw, so at least we could try to do it properly."

The narrator's psyche absorbs cross-cultural interactions and sheds particularity of his origin and narrow nationalism fostered and instilled in him by his grandmother. Unlike Ila's pragmatic cosmopolitanism, either lukewarm or lacking in vibrant reciprocity, the narrator learns the lesson of love and sacrifice untrammelled by exclusionary nationalism and spatiallim-its, first under the spiritual tutelage of Tridib, and later, in the warm embrace of May towards the close of the novel. He contrasts the cross-cultural perspectives of Tridib and Ila at several places in the novel. For instance:

> I tried to tell her, but neither then nor later, though we talked about it often, did I ever succeed in explaining to her that I could not forget because Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with; she, who had been travelling around the world since she was a child, could never understand what those hours in Tridib's room had meant to me, a boy who had never been more than a few hundred miles from Calcutta. I used to listen to her talking sometimes with her father and grandfather about the cafes in the Plaza Mayor in Madrid, or the crispness of the air in Cuzco, and I could see that those names, which were to me a set of magical talismans because Tridib had pointed them out to me on his tattered old Bartholomew's Atlas, had for her a familiarity no less dull than the lake had for me and my friends; the same tired intimacy that made us stop on our way back from the park in the evening and unbutton our shorts and aim our piss through the rusty wrought-iron railings.

Yet the narrator is hooked on to Ila's exotic appeal. It is her striking foreignness, her western ways and easy informality that attract him. Her liberated gestures and overtly off-beat demeanour arouse Tha'mma's contemptuous dislike for her. While the narrator develops a mesmeric fascination for Ila in the flush of adolescence, his grandmother hates her vulgar transgressions. Ila's preference for Nick Price and her later disappointment expose her wobbly transplantation in the western culture. Her dislocation stems from her penchant for illusions devoid of any real understanding of the cultural interface.

The adult narrator sees through Ila's hidden anxieties and discomfiture. Her last words in the novel are aimed at consoling the narrator and her cousin that everything is all right between her and Nick. Commenting on Ila's role in the novel, Suvir Kaul notes that she is central to the narrator's coming-of-age and functions "as a narrative scapegoat, a figure who acts as a lightning-rod for a great many sexual and cultural anxieties, and the telling of whose unhappy and even sordid itinerary, especially her relationship with Nick, takes on all the cautionary tones of a modem fable." Nick-Ila pairing is a counterpoint to Tridib-May kinship in the thematic frame-work of the novel. When the narrator looks at Ila's seductive foreignness with unstinted eye in his mature stage, he notices her snooty ways and cultural contradictions. Significantly, the novel ends with May and the narrator lying in close embrace after the former has recounted Tridib's tragic killing in Dhaka. May interprets Tridib's act as sacrifice and defines the manner of his giving up his life while rushing to Jethamoshai for his unsuccessful rescue from the frenzied rioters.

Tridib appreciates May's ideals of humanitarianism and acts like her soulmate. Jean Sudrann makes a perceptive comment on the thematic concerns of Amitav Ghosh: "As in his first novel, *The Circle of Reason*, where Ghosh pitted rationality against emotion as warring forces within and among people, so here the conflict has been resumed in epistemo-logical terms. Knowledge can set us free, but only if it is bred of heart as well as head. May's love-of the narrator, of Tridib, of the cycle-rickshaw man, of the hate-filled lawyer-which prompts her to reveal her innermost thoughts to the narrator, releases him from the silence which is outside his intelligence into the perhaps equally unspeakable mystery of love."

The novel insists on the imperatives that assure empathy and unimpeded flow of friendship, and mock the conception of militant nationalism, exclusive national pride and identity. The outbreak of communal strife in Dhaka following the disappearance of the prophet's hair in Srinagar exposes the fragil demarcation of political frontiers. The author's postcolonial angst for the disrupted subcontinental commonality and snapped cultural bonds is evident in the instant communal reaction to the Hazratbal incident in Calcutta and Dhaka. Tha'mma's ideals of nationalism nurtured since the Swadeshi movement do not stand the test of time. Hers is a misplaced sense of pride reminiscent of the 'tardy late-bourgeois world.'

Drawing national borders with blood is bound to be undone by the inherent logic of and propensity to separateness and divinations. Her senile old uncle has a grasp of ambiguous and tenuous geographical boundaries: "Once you start moving you never stop. That's what I told my sons when they took the trains. I said: I don't believe in this India-Shindia. It's all very well, you're going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to drawanother line somewhere! What will you do then! Where will you move to! No one will ever have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here, and I'll die here."

The message of the novel underlines the need of friendly ambience for co-existence and humanitarian ties across cultures independent of political managers. The 'indivisible sanity' of people beyond borders has the potential to ensure warm and wholesome international amity and exorcise divisive streaks and madness. Mayadebi and Tresawsen realize the palpable evidence of this desire among people both in England and Germany even as the second world war is looming ahead:

Well, she said, laughing, the couple of months she had spent in London had been so exciting-the atmosphere had changed so dramatically, even within the last few weeks. People were becoming friendlier; in the shops, on the streets, she couldn't help noticing. Everyone was so much nicer now; often when she and Tridib were out walking people would pat him on the head and stop to have a little chat with her; the shopkeepers would ask her how her husband was, and when he was to have his operation. But it wasn't just her-everyone was being friendly with everyone; why just that morning his sister, Elisabeth, had said that old Mrs. Dunbar who lived down the road had actually been civil for the first time in living memory ....

> Yes, he said, that's true-there's a kind of exhilaration in the air.
>
> Yes, that's the right word, said Mayadebi: exhilaration.
>
> I've been lucky, I've been lucky to watch England coming alive.
>
> I wouldn't have seen that if I hadn't been here now.

Tresawsen laughed. People don't believe me, he said, but it's the same over there—in Germany-though of course in a much more grotesque way. It was odd coming back here-like stepping through a looking glass.

The narrator with his expanded horizons and imaginative understanding of the world caught up in the vortex of violence and murderous rampage stresses on the urgency of preserving the memories of saner and humane transactions for cultural self-determination and inter-personal communication. The media and public memory must keep alive the 'indivisible sanity' of communities to prevent recurrence of insane frenzy. Ghosh has edged up his novel to confront the memory of traumatic events and shake up our indifference to the gathering potential of tragedy. All in all, the novel is "an eloquent critique of colonial hangover and cultural dislocation in postcolonial situation as also the psychological make-up of the contemporary man who thrives on violence." Amitav Ghosh projects these genuine Indian vibrations with remarkable competence.

16

Imagination and Reality in *The Shadow Lines*

The novel is no more the work of imagination than it is a reflection of reality: its essence, its necessary quality, lies in the expression of the connection between the real and the imaginary.

Amitav Ghosh's *Shadow Lines* resists classification. It is 'basically a memory novel' that weaves together past and present, childhood and adulthood, India and Bangladesh and Britain, Hindu and Muslim, story and happening, through the 'coil within coil of memories [that] unfurl within it'; it establishes its socio-historical situation through its careful observation of concrete social reality and as such can be regarded both as a social document and a political novel; it is also in many ways a bildungsroman, tracing the growth and development of the narrator from childhood to maturity. It is part of the Indian experiment with the non-fiction novel whose first significant landmark was Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*; it is as postmodernist a work of fiction as Farrukh Dhondy's *Bombay Duck*.

Several more labels can be affixed to *The Shadow Lines*, each as valid as the others; after all, as Henry James noted in *The Art of the Novel*, 'the Novel remains still, under the right persuasion, the most independent, most elastic, most prodigious of literary forms." But one of the most rewarding ways of reading the novel is, I believe, to see it as belonging to that long tradition of fiction that includes *Don Quixote* and

Tristram Shandy on the one hand and *Travels with My Aunt* and *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* on the other: fiction, that is, that examines its symbiotic relationship with fact and explores the role of the imagination in creating and evoking reality, which, 'in the artist's sense,' in the words of A.A. Mendilow, 'is always something created: it does not exist *a priori*.'

This theme is established in *The Shadow Lines* through the use of the geographical metaphor and the journey motif implicit in its title-derived, significantly, from Conrad and in the titles of its two parts, 'Going Away' and 'Coming Home.' This metaphor pervades the book and enables it to extend and to expand spatially and temporally (a journey, after all, takes place sequentially and in time). This is of course a traditional method for the novel that sets out to discover the relationship between imagination and reality; indeed, even Edward Said uses it when he observes of the novel, 'stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world.'

It is through its imagination, perception and rendering of human experience in everyday life, through what Proust calls the 'gross dimensions of social phenomena,' that the novel is able to 'evoke the essentially non-finite quality of existence.' Ghosh's approach has in fact a close affinity with Graham Greene's in *Travels with My Aunt* and *The Captain and the Enemy*, which are likewise concerned with this relationship and which are similarly based on the metaphor of the journey.

Appropriately, *The Shadow Lines* begins with a statement about a journey, one that Mayadebi, the narrator's great-aunt, her husband and Tridib, her son, undertook in 1939, from India to England: a journey which will be undertaken again and again, and by other characters in the novel, too, both physically and in the imagination, sometimes, however, from England to India as well. Tridib's father is a diplomat, living abroad or in Delhi and only occasionally visiting Calcutta; but Tridib himself prefers to stay on in their family house in an upper-middle-class neighbourhood of Calcutta with his elderly grandmother. Why he has rejected his parents's peripatetic lifestyle is not known, but the narrator's grandmother (and Tridib's aunt) puts it down to incompatibility with his father. The fiercely bourgeois old lady disapproves not of her nephew's estrangement from his father but of what she considers his flippancy in letting so trivial a matter stand in the way of his material prospects. In her eyes Tridib is an untrustworthy and dangerous nonconformist, though outwardly he may seem the quintessential middle-class Bengali, living staidly in Calcutta and looking after his grandmother, and engaged in research for his doctoral degree. The apparently everyday quality of his life, paradoxically, only emphasizes his uniqueness, and he is a source of perennial fascination for the boy who as a young adult is the narrator of the 'story' of the novel.

Tridib, too, is a story-teller, 'happiest in neutral, impersonal places coffee houses, bars, street-comer addas—the sort of place where people come, talk and go away without expecting to know each other any further, for it is detachment and objectivity that allow the imagination to soar. He spends much of his time in gossip with young ne'er-do-wells at street comers and tea-stalls, much to the distaste of the grandmother, who has a Gradgrind-like belief about time: 'For her time was like a toothbrush: it went mouldy if it wasn't used,' and stank.

Tridib, however, 'never seemed to use his time, but his time didn't stink.' For he is caught up with the non-essential, the non-material, the imaginary and the imaginative: the world of story, the world of the creative imagination. He himself, like his tales, constantly skirts the border between truth and falsehood, reality and the imagination, so that it is difficult to say whether it is fact or fiction that prevails with him. Sometimes his imagination creates a story that is truer than reality; once he speaks gravely of visiting his English relatives by marriage in London, describing them in graphic and truthful detail the only caveat being that they are not his relatives at all, nor has he been to London to meet them. The boy blurts out what he believes is the reality, and Tridib's exciting story falls apart, so that the truth of his account of the Price family is dismissed: the irony being, of course, that they do literally become his relatives by marriage in course of time.

Tridib's niece Ila sometimes comes to Calcutta, and the boy tries to remind her of their shared experiences of her uncle's stories. She is surprised by the vividness of his memories, for she cannot understand how, sitting in a little room in Calcutta, 'Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and ... eyes to see them with.' Ila has travelled all over the world with her parents, but too great an exposure to reality has erased the magic from her eyes, so that all those places on the map which are to him 'a set of magical talismans' are for her merely familiar, common-place, dull, significant only by virtue of the position of Ladies toilets in the airport lounges, which become for her the signs of stability, 'the only fixed points in the shifting landscapes of her childhood.' She is therefore irritated by the narrator's enthusiasm for the London Underground: 'To her the Underground was merely a means of shifting venue,' and he comments: " could not persuade her that a place does not merely exist, that it has to be invented in one's imagination; that her practical, bustling London was no less invented than mine, neither more nor less true, only very far apart.

It was not her fault that she could not understand, for as Tridib often said of her, the inventions she lived in moved with her, so that although she had lived in many places, she had never travelled at all.

Ila believes that her emphasis on reality has had a salutary effect on the narrator: 'at least you learnt that those cities you saw on maps were real places, not like those fairylands Tridib made up for you.' But Tridib, the archaeologist who makes the past come alive for the present, has never believed in fairy tales: what he had taught the boy was 'to use my imagination with precision.' For instance, when Ila's mother described an encounter with a snake in

Colombo, the boy tries to earn his mentor's approval by asking what kind of snake it was. Tridib, however, is disappointea. The snake has little to do with real life, and what kind it is merely factual information; what is interesting, rather, is to imagine life under a sloping roof, so unlike the flat ones of Calcutta.

This is what reality is, something that must be seen and known through the imagination, which works out of 'real desire,' 'a longing for everything that was not in oneself, a torment of the flesh, that carried one beyond the limits of one's mind to other times and other places, and even, if one was lucky, to a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror.' The mirror-image, repeated later in the novel too, is especially significant, for it is the traditional symbol of art.

Art is expected to represent or reflect reality, and the novel is a mirror walking along a highway, in Stendhal's picturesque phrase; but how far a mirror-image is 'real' and how far a distortion of 'reality' is to be questioned. As Michel Zeraffa observes, 'the "real" is what fate must reveal, sooner or later, for us to know. Fiction, on the other hand, consists in what can never be brought to our knowledge except through "splendidly wandering" thoughts and desires' through, that is, the imagination, which is thus no less 'real' than so-called 'reality.'

Indeed, even the apparently unimaginative Ila cannot do without imagination. As a child her only souvenirs of the faraway places she has lived in are the Yearbooks of her schools' the places themselves went past her in an illusory whirl of movement' with photographs of her fellow-students, about whom she weaves many stories. So the most beautiful and talented among them are her special friends, and yet she herself is never photographed with them; and when she finds that her cousin has discovered a photograph of a boy she has claimed to be her boyfriend with his arms around other girls, while Ila herself stands a little apart from everybody else, the page with the incriminating photograph is torn from the book. The boy realizes then that the exotic and unapproachable Ila is like him after all, creating her own reality, her own space, out of her imagination.

Similarly, when Ila teaches her cousin to play Houses with her in the dark basement (note the significance of this setting) of the family house in the village, she talks about Nick Price, with whom she has evidently played this game before and whom she describes as coming to her res-cue when she is attacked by a group of racist children in London. It is only later that the adult narrator learns what the reality was like: that Nick was ashamed of her and had certainly not gone to her aid at all. Ila is obviously in love with Nick, and she inveigles him into marrying her, with her father's money as bait; but she soon discovers that Nick does not care for her and is openly unfaithful. The only way in which she can cope with the situation is by pretending to herself and to her cousin that the reality is actually imaginary and that the imaginary world of well-being she creates is the reality.

Everyone in the novel, in fact, hovers over the shadow lines between imagination and reality; everyone has his or her stories and memories that are based partly on imagination, partly on reality, and when they are retold they are relived as well. They interlink and participate in each other, so that in the end the boundary between fact and fiction, imagination and reality, disappears, and everything becomes part of an imaginatively perceived experience of real life. The shadow lines between people and between the countries they inhabit and call their own, too, merge and become one. When, therefore, Ila shouts out that she has chosen to leave India and live in London because she wants to be free of her past, of her people and of the inhibitions they impose on her, the narrator shouts back at her, 'You can never be free of me .... If I were to die tomorrow you would not be free of me. You cannot be free of me because *I am within you* ... sic just as you are within me.'

Imagination is not just a part of reality, it can and does create its own reality. Rumour can start a riot; so that the story of the loss of the Prophet's hair in faraway Srinagar can kill Indian Hindus in Dhaka and make vast crowds of people believe that their water supply has been poisoned and break up a friendship in Calcutta. For it is imagination that links a people together, not the fact of geographical contiguity. The Bengali feels closer to what is happening on the Indian subcontinent than to events in Chiang Mai in Thailand or Chendu in China, which are closer to Calcutta than Delhi or Srinagar; while places in Europe as far away from each other as Khulna and Srinagar in South Asia remain uninvolved with each other, for there is no imaginative connection between them.

Indeed, the physical fact of geographical boundaries between nations is of no real importance: the border drawn between the two Bengals has in fact pulled them even closer together, 'So close that I, in Calcutta, had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other, locked into an irreversible symmetry by the line that was to set us free-our looking-glass border.'

Facts can in fact distort reality much more than imagination can. Thus the intensely felt horrors and the betrayals of the riots in Bengal following the theft of the Prophet's hair hardly find a mention in the newspapers outside Bengal, and when the narrator recalls the event his friends suggest that he might have imagined it all. He is naturally 'unnerved by the possibility that he had lived for all those years with a memory of an imagined event, until he remembers that the riot had coincided with a Test Match in Madras.

Searching through the papers of that day he finally discovers a brief mention about them-except that the report is about Khulna, not about Calcutta or Dhaka. The riots in these two cities of Bengal have 'dropped out of memory into the crater of a volcano of silence' because neither the newspaper nor the reader was at the time or later imaginatively involved with what had happened then. To bring them back to light now requires the narrator to make the 'strangest journey' of all: 'a voyage into a land outside space, an expanse without distances; a land of looking-glass events.'

Zeraffa's comments about what he calls the 'documentary novel' the non-fiction novel, as it is most commonly known-are of relevance here: "This idea of reality is suited to a mass society whose eyes and ears are daily assailed with innumerable aspects of the world so that the imagination is clogged, instead of being inspired. The idea of society and social structures is beginning to disappear under an increasing flood of social facts, always being revised, which are represented as instances." Reality is as subjective as the imagination; facts are not, and so cannot be as true as imaginatively comprehended experience.

Perhaps the character who most clearly illustrates this is the narrator's grandmother, posited from the beginning of the novel as Tridib's opposite. She may disapprove of Tridib's unconventionality, but Tridib can sympathize imaginatively with her, and sums her lip as "a modern middle-class woman-though not wholly, for she would not permit her-self the self-deceptions that make up the fantasy world of that kind of person. All she wanted was a middle-class life in which, like the middle classes the world over, she would thrive believing in the unity of nation-hood and territory, of self-respect and national power: that was all she wanted-a modern middle-class life, a small thing that history had denied her in its fullness and for which she could never forgive it."

For her nationality is not something nebulous and ambiguous but a reality built over 'hundreds of years, years and years of war and bloodshed.... They know they're nation because they've drawn their borders with blood.... That's what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget they were born this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi: they become a family born of the same pool of blood. As a young girl in the turbulent years of the freedom struggle she had seen for herself what shedding blood for the sake of the country had meant, and she had been inspired enough by the freedom-fighters to join the terrorist movement, even to kill, for her cause, and she retains this fierceness till the end.

That is why she believes Ila is wrong to make England her country; if she does so, it is 'because she's greedy; she's gone there for money.' The grandmother knows that Ila's claim to be free outside India is false; freedom cannot be bought 'for the price of an air ticket,' for it is much more than being 'left alone to do what one pleases.' Ila's horizons are shrunken because she does not use her imagination to find out the real meaning of freedom. The narrator knows, however, that freedom lies in being bound and in living with 'the clamour of voices within him' that his imagination gives rise to: the freedom to imagine and to feel.

The grandmother is so angry about her grandson's defence of Ila that she believes he shares the young woman's view of freedom and that, accordingly, he must visit prostitutes in Delhi, where he is studying; she even writes to the dean of his college complaining about his character and demanding his expulsion. The narrator easily denies the charges; but the fact remains that her imagination has not run too far away from reality. As she sinks into dementia following her retirement, she lives more and more in her imaginary world and rejects the 'real' one.

The grandmother's memories of the Dhaka of her childhood are so sharp, vivid and concrete that her grandson can easily visualize it for himself, in another kind of imaginative reconstruction of reality. When she gets an opportunity to go there again as an old woman, she is at first a little reluctant, for reality often destroys memories and dreams. But she convinces herself that she has a mission ahead, to rescue her old uncle living alone in their old family house, although he and her father had long been estranged.

She is full of excitement when her plans are finalized, but not because, as the boy thinks, of the prospect of her first flight, but because, she hoped to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane. She cannot believe that there are no lines or marks to separate the two countries; obviously, then, partition has failed, if things are as they used to be before with no definite boundaries; it has merely made her, and thousands like her, aliens in their own home.

Dhaka itself no longer seems the same Dhaka, but it is only when she and Mayadebi see their old house that reality overtakes memory and imagination. The house is changed beyond recognition, but the uncle has not: he clings to the only reality he knows, the old family feud, and refuses to go with them: "Once you start moving you never stop .... It's all very well, you're going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? No one will have you anywhere." And when he does agree to move, it is the end for him. The stay-at--home can survive, because his imagination keeps him alive; reality can kill.

The old uncle's end is the end also for Tridib, who had accompanied the two elderly ladies to their ancestral home to rescue their recalcitrant relative. On their way back, the riots break out and their car is attacked by a frenzied mob. They would have got away had it not been for May, the girl he is in love with, the kind considerate girl whose honesty is as-sailed so scornfully as barren by her brother Nick and who is distressed by what the Victoria Memorial symbolizes, the harsh reality of power games. On the Indian streets she had once killed a dying dog, run over by Tridib's car, with her penknife; now in Dhaka she reenacts what she had done then with Tridib as her victim.

For she sees coming behind them the old uncle in a rickshaw pulled by his trusted Khalil; and when 'the mob goes after them instead,' May jumps out of the car, against everybody's advice, to help them, and Tridib runs after her to help her, as he had always done. She herself is untouched, for she is 'an English memsahib,' but the old man, the rickshaw-puller and Tridib are slaughtered. May realizes now that her earlier kindness had been insensitive, and that it was because of her that Tridib died. Clearly, then, kindness is not enough if it is not accompanied by understanding, which is the gift of imagination. For years May has blamed herself for his death. But now she has seen the reality behind Tridib's death: 'He gave himself up; it was a sacrifice. I know I can't understand it, I know I mustn't try, for any real sacrifice is a mystery.' (251-52) Ultimately, then, it is imagination which triumphs, for it gives her and the narrator and the reader a 'glimpse' of 'a final redemptive mystery' that must re-main distanced from reality.

17

In an Antique Land: A Critical Study

Montesquieu's *The Persian Letters* "is a combination of oriental, philosophical essay, and epistolary fiction. The seventeenth century spirit of exploration stimulated the publication of many new accounts of what to Europeans was the mysterious East. Fascinated by cultures that in many instances equalled their own, Europeans came to scrutinize their own standards and to analyze general patterns of social behaviour. The philosophical essay, with its tone of reasonableness, was a natural vehicle for the thoughts of the rationalist writers, but for the popularization of these ideas epistolary prose fiction served better."

Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land?* in my opinion a demi, oriental tale and epistolary fiction on the one hand, and, on the other a contemporary novel, delineating' some ordinary characters, in their daily encounters, with religious rites and social customs, personal whims and eccentricities, sometimes grave, solemn and other times humorous, antiquarian, *in esse,* helps contemporaneity, tale grows into story, ordinariness assumes historicity and anthropology becomes the half-sister of history. This led Clifford Geertz to say, "a change in the ecology of learning, like so many migrant geese, has driven anthropologist and historian into one other's territories."

In an Antique Land, a tour de force, is first book of its kind, written by an Indian-English writer. Ghosh makes a comparative study of the two oldest cultures and civilizations of the two most important continents-Asia and Afrid', that of India and Egypt. Unlike other historians, he researches on an Inaian slave Bomma and his master Abraham Ben Yiju, plying a flourishing overseas trade in Mangalore, in the twelfth century. It is just a small incident on all accounts when Ghosh chanced to discover in a letter written by a merchant of Aden to Ben Yiju, a Tunisian, during his research work in Oxford. This letter seems "to open a trap-door into a vast network of foxholes whose real life continues uninterrupted." He "knew nothing then about the Slave of MS H. except that he had given me a right to be there, a sense of entitlement."

A "sense of entitlement" led Ghosh to go to Egypt and the USA, following trails left by a Hebrew journal, *Zion, Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders,* translated and edited by S.D. Goitein of Princeton University. Ben Yiju's "origin lay in a region that was known as Ifriya in the Arabic-speaking world of the Middle Ages-an area centred around what is now Tunisia." Following the migration of traders to Egypt, Ben Yiju also migrated to Egypt, joined the 'Synagogue of the Palestinians,' the building destined to last until a good seven hundred years after Ben Yiju's lifetime. "A man of many accomplishments, a distinguished calligrapher, scholar and poet," Ben Yiju, a born trader, migrated from Egypt to Aden, the port that sat astride the most important sea-routes connecting the Middle East and the Indian Ocean. His paper shows that his acquaintance with a wealthy and powerful trader Madmun ibn al-Hasan ibn Bundar proves to be a turning point in the life of Ben Yiju. It is possible that Ben Yiju was introduced to Madmun, by letters of introduction by his friends and relatives.

Ghosh, by deft sleight of hand, introduces the term 'Geniza,' "a word that is thought to have come into Hebrew from a Persian root, ganj, meaning 'storehouse' a common element in place-names in India and Iran, particularly beloved of the British who sprinkled it liberally across their Indian settlements in odd anglicized forms like 'Ballygunge' and 'Daltongunj.' Geniza, in the synagogue, was the depository of all writings of the Jews, intended to present the accidental desecration of any written form of God's name. By another sleight of hand, he says: "I found that some of the usages of the dialect of Lataifa were startlingly close to those of North African Arabic spoken by Ben Yiju." There was startlingly a similarity of certain words and turns of phrase in the Ben Yiju document with Lataifa and Nashawy. Ghosh cleverly and linguistically first brings the ancient Egypt closer to India, and then, the twelfth-century Egypt to the contemporary Egypt.

After Ben Yiju settled as a trader in the Malabar before 1932, there was a continuous exchange of letters between Madmun, Yusuf ibn Abraham and Khalaf Ibn Ishaq from Aden and Ben Yiju from India. Yusuf was "a judicial functionary as well as a trader: a man of a somewhat self-absorbed and irritable disposition, on the evidence of his letters. The other was Khalaf Ibn Ishaq—the writer of MS H. 6, and possibly the closest of Ben Yuri's friends in Aden." (156-57) What is more interesting is the fact that, unlike other traders cum travellers, Abu Said Halfon and Abu Zikri Sijlmasi, Ben Yiju '"does not seem to have travelled back to Aden or Egypt even once in the nineteen or twenty years that he was in India."

Once he had settled in Mangalore, according to a document available, he married Ashu a slave girl. She is not mentioned anywhere in the entire corpus of Ben Yiju's documents except in a set of accounts scribbled on the back of one of Madmun's letters. "It links her to the matrilineal community of Nairs, who still form a substantial section of the population of the southern part of the Malabar coast." The document reveals that in India "concubinage is permitted between everyone, so long as it is not with married woman." A couple of centuries before Ben Yiju's lifetime, a chronicler in the Persian Gulf part of Siraf had professed shock upon hearing duties of Indian temple dancers. "Let us thank God," he had written in pious disapproval, "for the Quran which he has chosen for us and with which he has preserved us from the sins of the infidels." In *The Persian Letters* Montesquieu also writes about the "nature of European and Asiatic religions in one subject of continuing interest. The Mohammedan rules against the eating of pork, for example, are made to seem as unreasonable as the Catholic veneration of the Virgin birth."

Indian temple dancers, devadasis in Sanskrit term, literally means "servant or slave of god." Their tradition was matrilineal, as situation which inevitably led to the unusual valuing of the female over the male. Not to talk of the chronicler mentioned above, even Europeans like Domingos Paes, Abbe Dubois and Beryl De Zoete have written disparaging comment on them. So far as history reads, devadasis were given their due status and prestige during the Chola and Pallava dynasty.

They were skilful in art and dance and they dedicated their lives to the cause of God by saying regular prayers, chanting hymns and cleaning the temple precincts. When Ben Yiju married Ashu, Europeans were far behind his time, in writing derogatory language about devadasis and Indians, following the writings of these Europeans, had started campaigns against this system. R.K. Narayan, in his novel *The Man-Eater of Malgudi,* introduces a devadasi character, Rangi. Although never actually called a devadasi, she is alternately identified as a "public woman, "a woman of the temple," "a temple prostitute," "a dedicated woman" and "a dancing woman," all of which epithets point to this South Indian profession and heritage.

The devadasi system' is linked with a Hindu myth. Parasuram, the legendary saint-warrior, beheaded his mother Renuka on the order of his father saint Jamadanga. Then, Parasuram wanted to get his mother's life back. The saint agreed on condition that Renuka would get back her life with the head of a harijan woman. Then that harijan woman was rewarded with the status of a Goddess to be worshipped by people in recognition of her noble contribution.

The name of Malabar is linked with its Arabic nomenclature and the "name was applied loosely to the southern third of the west coast, an area that shares' many aspects of a common culture." Ghosh connects the past with the present. Before and after the arrival of Ben Yiju in Mangalore, the Middle Eastern travellers and traders found the economic opportunities here in the form of industrial craft, apart from one of the richest spice-producing territories of the medieval world. History takes its revenge. Today, Jure divino or Jure humano, thousands of Mangaloreans migrate to the Persian Gulf, in search of employment and trade.

In one of his regular exchanges of letters with Ben Yiju, Khalaf Ibn Ishaq makes a point of singling the slave (Bomma) out and sending him 'plentiful greetings.' This letter bears the catalogue number MS H. 6 of the National and University library in Jerusalem. In another letter, Bomma gains a brief footnote. It merely explains him as Ben Yiju's Indian slave and business agent, a respected member of his household. 'According to a specialist in history,' Barna is 'vernacular for Brahma.' Professor Vivek Rai corrects 'Bama' for 'Bomma.' The research of Ghosh on Bomma reveals one more aspect of Indian culture, centred in and around Mangalore, embedded in the Tulu culture of the area. First of all, there were various groups and clans in Tulunad. Secondly, despite diversity in social hierarchy, they spoke Tulu for one, and "they also followed matrilineal rules of inheritance for certain kinds of property."

Thirdly, they shared in the worship of certain spirit-deities known as Bhutas. There were also many untouchables among them. The Indian history speaks of the assimilation of the Dravidians and Aryans, their living in peaceful co-existence, in South India, since time immemorial. Ghosh is in trail of religious and cultural roots of the slave. The Aryans (Brahmins) practised the folk-region of the high Sanskritic tradition and the Dravidians followed Bhuta-cult, the local form of worship. There were Brahmin temples as well as Bhuta shrines. "There was no contradiction in this, of course, for to them Bhutas and Sanskritic deities represented aspects of divine and supernatural power that shaded gently and imperceptibly into each other. Indeed, under the benign cover of that shade, there was a good deal of trafficking between the two pantheons: some Bhuta deities would occasionally appear within the mists of high Sanskritism, while others fell from faveur and vanished into the nether world." The origin of the name of the slave 'Bomma' is, in all likelihood, a diminutive of 'Berme,' the principal figure in the pantheon of Tuluva Bhuta-deities and this Tulu deity, over time, with the growth of Brahminical influence, is slowly assimilated to the Sanskritic deity 'Brahma.'

This is a synthesis at the cost of historic memory. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee says: "the Dravidians of the south, by accepting the philosophy and religion of this composite culture (Austrico-Mongolo-Dravido-Aryan), together with the language that was its authoritative repository, viz., Sanskrit, made an outstanding contribution to its development and enrichment." When Ghosh, accompanied by Father D'Souza, visited a village near Mangalore, he was told by a lady that "not now, never: everybody had good Sanskritic names nowadays names like 'Bomma' belonged to a time when very few people in the community had been educated and fisherman had ranked at the bottom of the social order." The walls of the houses were painted prominently with the letter 'Om' and an old shrine was remodelled after a classical Hindu temple, its walls bore the posters of a fundamentalist Hindu political organization.

Ghosh, in a parallel study of history, reveals that in the time of Ben Yiju, there was no sectarian and religious clash between the Jews and the Muslims in the Middle East. In *The Persian Letters*, dismayed by the sectarian nonsense that he meets with in religious matters, Usbek concludes, "whatever religion a man lives under, the observation of the Laws, love of our neighbour, duty to our Parents, are the chief Acts of Religion." In Middle East, the Jews were strongly aware of their distinctive religious identity but they, simultaneously, living in the Arabic-speaking world, shared the everyday language of their religious life with the Muslims of that region; "when they invoked the name of God in their writings it was usually as Allah, and more often than not their invocations were in Arabic forms, such as *insha allah* and al-hamdulillah. Distinct though their faith was, it was still a part of the religious world of the Middle East-and that world was being turned upside down by the Sufis, the mystics of Islam."

The Sufis influenced Judaism as they influenced the orthodox Islam in the Middle East. One Jew Sufi, Abraham Maimonides, is known to have remarked once that the Sufis were "worthier disciples of the Prophets of Israel than were the Jews of his time." In Bomma's time in India, as Ben Yiju's time in the Middle East, Vachanaka the saint-poet taught an egalitatian culture, creating fraternal communities of artisans and working people. For the Sufis as for the Vachanakas, the notion of being held by bonds was one of the central metaphors of religious life. "They too draw some of their most powerful images from the institution of slavery: metaphors of perfect devotion and love strung together in an intensely charged, often erotic, spiritual imagery." Therefore, it is possible that the meaning of slavery, in the time of Bomma and Ben Y-iju, means the ties "that bound an apprentice to a master craftsman, an accountant to a merchant... as links that were in some small way ennobling human connections, pledges of commitment, in relationships that could just as well have been a matter of a mere exchange of coinage." Bomma is, therefore, a slave and business agent, a respected member of the household of Ben Yiju.

The older versions of Judaism showing the bond of linguistic and cultural identity with Muslims, like Hindus and Muslims in India, in course of time, became mutually antagonists and, then, fundamentalists. The writings on the walls of houses of a village by a fundamentalist party is as glaring as the fundamentalism of Muslims and Jews, in the present-day world. The sufism of the Arabic-speaking people of the middle East, the religious tolerance of the time of Ben Yiju, on the one hand, and, the egalitarian preaching of Vachanaka on the other have yielded place to Hindu, Muslim and Jew fundamentalism. How similar is the religious, cultural history of Ben Yiju and Bomma?

The linguistic diversity and similarity of the Ben Yiju's time ought to be explored. It is likely that Ben Yiju corresponded with his friends in Aden in Arabic. But the question still nags us: how did Ben Yiju communicate with Ashu and Bomma or with his business associates, hailing from various regions in India. There is no evidence that he ever acquired fluency in Tulu or any other south Indian language. Indeed, the linguistic diversity was formidable. The Arab geographer Masudi refers to a language called 'Liiriyya,' which he describes as being spoken along much of the length of the Malabar coast. It is possible "he was referring to a pidgin, one that was possibly compounded largely of Perso-Arabic and north Indian elements, and was in use amongst merchants and traders all along the coast."

In the matter of dress, diversity persists. Ben Yiju continued to wear the customary garments of the Middle East-robes, turbans and the like. During his business tour of Aden, Bomma brought back to India two 'gowns' for Ben Yiju. "The people of Malabar, on the other hand, generally left the upper part of their bodies bare, men and women alike-their preferred markers of class distinction being ornaments and jewellery rather than articles of clothing." (267) Ghosh, once again, by sleight of hand, says that Ben Yiju received delicacies such as raisins, nougat, dates and "Middle Eastern cane-sugar."

India produced palm sugar but Egypt had pioneered the production of cane-sugar which were exported to many parts of Asia, including-India. And, "the Arabic Wordsukkar (hence the English 'sugar') is itself ultimately derived from a Sanskrit source: today, throughout north India, crystallized sugar is still known as misri in commemoration of traders like Ben Yiju and the tastes they imported from Masr."

The religious, cultural, social and linguistic studies, gleaned from the letters, are the images of Oriental life, fruits of the herculean research work of Amitav Ghosh. William Graves, writing an introduction for *The Persian Letters*, observes: "Although there is minimal plot development in the first volume, the personal and social concerns of the personae in-sure thematic unity. Usbek and Rica observe the manners of European history-principally French-relate their impressions to life in Persia, and finally comment generally on the significance of their discoveries." The plurality of the Oriental culture was destroyed by the advent of Europeans in both the continents. Some three hundred and fifty years after Ben Yiju left Mangalore, Vasco da Gama landed in India, in the Southern coast. "Within a few years of that day the knell had been struck for the world that had brought Bomma, Ben Yiju and Ashu together." The concept of plurality, for European historians, is but a fatal weakness, since "the dignity of nuances of choice and preference" is not allowed to the vanquished.

The same fate awaited the Geniza documents. The Western cultural predators since 1864 cast their evil eyes on them. First, Jacob Saphir took only a 'few leaves from various old books and manuscripts. Then, Abraham Firkowitch, a Crime an Jew of the Karaite sect, pillaged the precious oriental documents, now collected in the State Public Library in St. Petersburg. The dispersal of documents went on. By the first world war, the geniza had finally been emptied of all its documents. Egypt is left with not a scrap of paper to remind her of that aspect of her past. "It was as though the borders that were to divide Palestine several decades later had already been drawn, through time rather than territory, to allocate a choice of Histories."

Bomma's story ends in Philadelphia. The documents are kept in the Annenberg Research Institute, a creation of America's television magazines, 'TV Guide' "cared for the spin-offs of 'Dallas' and 'Dynasty' and protected by the awful might of the American police." It provides proof that Bomma was with Ben Yiju when he went back to settle in Egypt in the last years of his life. Ghosh thus draws and reworks a number of sources and traditions that span a varied range of concerns and historical situations. Like Michael Ondaatje, a Canadian, he bases his tale on characters and records retrieved from the archives. Ondaatje's own assertion about his shaping of a guiding or organizational principle in his novel, *In the Skin of a Lion*, "The first sentence of every novel should be; 'Trust me this will take time, but there is order here, very faint, very human'' could as well be the pronouncement of Ghosh, also. The personal and social concerns of the personae insure thematic unity.

While the pursuit of Ben Yiju and Bomma is impressive not only for its scholarship but also for building a bridge between the two most ancient cultures and civilizations, it's the second strand that brings to the fore Ghosh's special skills, displayed in *The Circle of Reason*, viz., strong characterization, compassionate humour and convincingly translated dialogue. These special skills are preserved in the two sections, "Lataifa" and "Nashawy" named after the two Egyptian villages where the author stays for his field work. His intimate relationship with the villagers, their religious practices, social patterns and mentality is a source of education to us. It is a wonder that these villagers, unaffected by the Muslim fundamentalists, have cultivated a catholicity, an insatiable urge to know the Hindu India, despite the fact that a vast tract of land separates Egypt and India.

Characterization is evidenced in the "Lataifa" and "Nashawy" sections. In the former, the most impressive character is Abu-Ali. Then, there is Jabir, a foil to Abu-Ali, Shaikh Musa and Ustaz Mustafa. All of them live a pious pastoral life, untouched by the evil of modern civilization and crass materialism, except Abu-Ali. All of them, living thousands of miles away from India, unacquainted with newspapers, books, televisions, lived in the belief: Ignoti nulla Cupido. Ghosh unsettles them. Ustaz Mustafa, in one way, is their spokesperson, asking many questions on 'Hinduki' business.

> "What is this "Hinduki" things? I have heard of it before and I don't understand it. If it is not Christianity nor Judaism nor Islam what can it be? Who are its prophets?"
>
> "I know-it's cows you worship-isn't that so?"
>
> "What is your God like?"
>
> "Now that you are here among us you can understand and learn about Islam, and then you can make up your mind whether you want to stay within that religion of yours."

Ustaz Mustafa is a learned, devout specialist in civil and religious law. He is now practising in a court in Damanhtur. His scanty knowledge about India and Hinduism was gained when the was a student of law at the University of Alexandria. Like a Hindu Brahmin, he would walk carefully lest any impure matter would touch his jallabeyya. He read his namaz four or five times a day, ready to espouse Islam not out of fanaticism but out of ignorance of Hinduism.

Abu-Ali is a small trader who hurt his leg in his childhood and is excused "for not working on the land and as a result his father had allowed him to go through school ... he had cultivated contracts with students from influential families . . . he succeeded in getting a permit to set up a government-subsidized shop for retailing essential commodities at controlled prices." As a man he was miserly and greedy and as a businessman, a good bargainer: "he had a remarkable talent for squeezing the last piastre from everything that came his way. People often said that it was useless to bargain with Abu-Ali: in the end he would get exactly what he wanted." He was overbearing, haughty, possessive but, at times, timid also, especially, in the presence of Jabir. Jabir is impulsive, friendly, shy though sharp tongued for Abu-Ali, a boy in his late teens. Jabir's father was a cousin of Abu-Ali in the paternal line, and thus Jabir belongs to an extended family, or lineage, of which Abu-Ali was nominally the head. Besides, Jabir was also the best friend with one of Abu-Ali's sons.

Shaikh Musa, in his mid-fifties, a contemporary of Abu-Ali, is a kind-hearted, moderate and matured man, unlike Abu-Ali He inspires trust, again unlike Abu-Ali Once or twice, obliquely, he warned Ghosh against Abu-Ali and his unfettered greed:

> "Things are cheap in the countryside," he said, "much cheaper than they are in the city .... You should not expect to pay as much here as you would in the city ..."
>
> I was taken aback for a moment, and then I realized that he was referring obliquely to Abu-Ali.

Ghosh was a lodger in Abu-Ali's house.

All these characters, with the exception of Mustafa who does not appear afterwards, develop into three-dimensional mould of a conventional novel in the section "Going Back." The "Lataifa" section is concerned with the first visit of Ghosh in 1981.

This second visit, exactly seven years later, in 1988, is mentioned in "Going Back." In 1981, even a purchase of 'al-makana al-Hindi,' the Indian machine was a novelty, a matter of rejoicing and exultation. The Iraq-Iran war has changed the material and human face of Lataifa. In 1988, the people have refrigerators, washing machines, television sets, Toyota pick-up trucks, food processors, calculators, exotic pens and watches. It is a story of migration and metamorphosis. Characters grow, materially, mentally and spiritually. We are presented with an account of its linear and cumulative progression. Ghosh's description of the plight of the worker, in Iraq, does not necessarily involve the advocacy of a teleological Marxist vision which projects the downfall of that "bare-knuckle capitalism."Jabir, a shy young man of acid tongue, is now a great orator in colleges and universities. He had sported a beard for a while but had to shave it because a secular Egypt, though a Muslim country, "isn't safe to look like a Muslim." Is not the same complaint uttered by a devout Hindu, in India? He grows out of his past, matures. His boyish shyness "sharp-tongued ferocity" has been replaced by "a kind of quiet hopelessness, an attitude of resignation."

Shaikh Musa develops hilarity and pride and awe. He gleefully tells about refrigerators and iced water. There was a time when he looked through the window of a showroom but did not have the heart to enter it. "It had come as a shock to think that boys like Mabrouk thought nothing of going into places like that." There was a time when he overawed others in his family, by his knowledge of religion. Now, Jabir overawes him by the profundity of his knowledge on matters of 'religion: "he would not have dreamed of entering that milieu: he considered himself far too ignorant to enter into learned arguments on matters of religion."

Abu-Ali, clever and imaginative, is the first man in Lataifa "to be-come aware of the opportunities that were opening up in Iraq, during the war with Iran." His foresightedness pays him rich dividends. His material possessions awestrike Shaikh Musa and Ghosh "like helots gazing at the spoils of Pharaoh." His inbred bad temper gives way to a MGM lion's roar. His accessibility to his relatives and friends has changed as "Abu-Ali had now risen to an estate where neither his family nor his neighbours were fit to use his furniture." Characters like Ustaz Sabry, Imam Ibrahim; Khames the Rat, Yasir, Nabeel, Busaina and Taha people the section "Nashawy," like the characters in the section "Lataifa," have distinct identities, growth, both material and mental. It was a part of a great desert till 1820 when two young, belonging to Bedouin and Abu-Kanaka origins settled in Nashawy. Imam Ibrahim belonged to the latter lineage.

Ibrahim, in his youth, had the gift of baraka. Now, he looks older than Shaikh Musa, his contemporary, and always lives in seclusion. He was a barber and healer. "He had shown remarkable skill in curing the sick . . . was very learned in the classical arts of learning . . . could do miracles with herbs and roots .... He had also become known for his learning in the scriptures, and at one time he had been much sought after for his opinions on points of theology and matters of religious law and jurisprudence." Ustaz Sabry is a young teacher, a too-much-talk and a well-informed man, known in the surrounding villages. He is religious but not superstitious. On one occasion, "in a speech ... he had condemned the custom that the women observed, of leaving offerings at the graves of dead relatives.... He and the other teachers had even succeeded in uniting the villagers against a man who was known to perform exorcism rituals for women, secret Ethiopian rites called zar." He was also a social worker. They "had even hatched a plan to start a consumer's co-operative ... so that people of Nashawy would no longer have to put up with the sinful profiteering of the village's shopkeepers. In time, with the help of God, they would succeed in rooting out all exploitation and un-belief from the village, and people would see for themselves where the path of true Islam lay."

Khamees the Rat is in his mid-twenties, scrawny, with a thin mobile face, deeply scorched by the sun. He has the brightness of eye and the slightly sardonic touch to his mouth. Unlike Mustafa in Lataifa, Khamees has a kind of appalled admiration of Hindus. He is eccentric in most things because he is ignorant and "the world outside was still replete with the wonders of the unknown." He marries twice but re-mains childless and it could be one of the reasons for his eccentricities. Yasir is a pleasant, cheerful-looking person, in his early forties or so, a tall, deep-chested man who, like his father, always wears a large white turban. Like his father Ibrahim, he has learnt to cut hair; even his father later on derives no satisfaction in his craft. Again, unlike his father, he sets up a small barber shop, the first in the entire area. He is meek, docile, dutiful and non-interfering. He neither sulks like his father nor projects himself like all staz Sabry.

Busaina, the sister of Khamees, has been married off years ago to a man from Nakhlatain, not far from Lataifa. A self-respecting woman, she walks out of her husband's house with two fine and healthy children when he decides to marry another girl. Shaikh Musa comments: "The Jarnmal are all like that, difficult and quarrelsome, and it's best to keep them at a distance." She does not mourn her exile nor does she find it difficult to adjust, once again, among her brothers.

Nabeel graduates from an Agricultural training college in Daman-hour. Ambitious, sharp and intelligent, he ultimately lands in Iraq. Taha, in his late fifties or thereabouts, known as uncle, is a vendor. Ate is also a kind of witch, a sahir and he occasionally earned a bit of extra money by casting the odd spell.

There is compassionate humour in *In an Antique Land*. Like Swift, it is not the air and body of the novel, you merely catch glimpses of it as you might catch the flashes of a sword waved in the sunlight. J.B. Priestley says: "In order to be a humorist, you must have a needle eye for the incongruities, all the' idiocies and antics of this life, but you must also have-strange and contradictory as it may seem-an unusual quickness and warmth of feeling, an instant affection for all that is lovable." Amitav Ghosh is one such humorist.

The first instance of Ghosh's humour is Abu-Ali, his driving a delicate and sturdy Japanese moped:

> He would hitch up the hem of his jallabeyya and then, lifting up his leg, he would mount the vehicle with a little sidelong hop, while his son held it steady .. To me, watching from the roof, it seemed hardly credible that so delicate a machine would succeed in carrying a man of Abu-Ali's weight over that bumpy dirt track. But to my astonishment it invariably did: he would go shooting off down the road, his jallabeyya ballooning out around him, while the moped, in profile, diminished into a thin, sharp line-it was like watching a gargantuan lollipop being carried away by its stick. (28)

Abu-Ali's vehicle is the pitiful beast-the "lean hack" of Don Quixote of Cervantes, all skin and bone. His jallabeyya is like Quixote's old suit of armour. Then, there is his hilarious ride on his moped which makes him a laughable and lovable character in this story. Another example is that of Mabrouk, his father and other relatives. They, like the Shandies of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, may not understand Hindu customs, religious rites and rituals. Nevertheless, they exult at their purchase of an 'al-makana al-Hindi,' the Indian machine. Their exultation causes bewilderment to Ghosh for he has been asked to verify whether they have got a good 'one or not. He knows nothing at all about water pumps; indeed, "I would not recall ever having noticed one before coming to Lataifa." Yet, he has to justify the confidence reposed in him by the family of Mabrouk.

> A hush fell upon the courtyard as I walked up to the machine .... I went up to the machine's spout, stopped beside it and peered knowledgeably into its inky interior, shutting one eye. Standing up again, I walked around the pump amidst a deathly silence, nodding to myself, occasionally tapping parts of it with my knuckles. Then placing both hands on the diesel motor, I fell to my knees and shut my eyes. When I looked up again Mabrouk's father was standing above me, anxiously awaiting the outcome of my silent communion with this product of my native soil.

We have here not only the Shandy bewilderment but also the Shandy affection. Ghosh may not have his compeer in this genre of novel-writing in India but he has A.S. Byatt as his compeer in the British fiction. Her *Possession: A Romance* (1990) is a latter-day version of the romance quest. It is also a thoughtful work about two contemporary academics researching the lives and romantic relations of two mid-Victorian romantic poets, Randolp Ash and Christine La Motte. Malolm Bradbury comments: "Through a plot of complicated literary detection, and a multiplication of stories and texts, the novel explores the relation between romance and reality, lies and truths, the Victorian conception of the romantic self and the modem notion of the self as a discontinuous machinery and electrical message-network of various desires, ideological beliefs and responses, language forms and hormones and pheromones. Similarly, David Lodge's *Small World* is a version of the medieval quest romance, where the heroes and heroines no longer go on pigrimages but on academic conferences.

V.S. Naipaul's *A Way in the World* (1994) contains, like the histories of Ben Yiju and Madmum and Bomma, the histories of Sir Walter Raleigh and his discovery of Eldorado in the early seventeenth century, and Francisco Miranda and his attempts to liberate Venezuela from Spanish rule in the early nineteenth century. Both are written as fiction, both subtitled "An unwritten story," as if they were unused fragments from the narrator's archive. Unlike Naipaul who privileges Europe and European ways at the cost of non-Euroepan, Ghosh privileges both African and Asian ways with unjaundiced eyes which increases the value of *In an Antique Land*.

Foucault elaborates, gesturing towards the possibilities, which arise when such assumptions are called into question: "The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epochs of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and the far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than of a network that connects points and inter-sects with its own skein."

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In an Antique Land: A Traveller's Tale

Amitav Ghosh describes himself as a traveller interested in men, places and scenery. All the world, as Shakespeare said, is a stage, and this for Ghosh is a key metaphor. In his review Homai Shroff points out that the writer explores "a colourful and warmly human picture of people and places, both medieval and modem." Ghosh seems to think that travel is man's primordial quest to expand his awareness into realization. Perhaps this is the reason he embarks upon tracing the history (journey into the time) of a Jewish mer-chant, Ben Yiju from Egypt who spent two decades in Mangalore (a trade centre on Malabar coast in India) and his relationship with Indian slave Bomma, who worked for him as a business representative in Aden. Ghosh recedes into twelfth century in order to develop his story.

Ghosh like Vikram Seth believes that travel in "antique lands" is an experience for liberty, "perfect liberty, to think, feel do just as one pleases." Ghosh's journey reminds one of Hazlitt's "On Going a Journey" as far as the sincerity of description goes. Like Graham Greene's priest in *Power and Glory* and Ernest Hemingway's Old Man in *The Old Man and the Sea*, his spirits remain undaunted till he completes his endeavours.

Curiosity is his first love which enthralls him to go to small villages-Lataifa and Nashawy-South of Alexandria in Egypt. Inquisitive as Ghosh is, he has, to use Silmuel Johnson's phrase, a 'vigorous intellect' to work patiently for little more than ten years or so to weave story of his novel into a fine texturous fibre. As a social anthropologist he introduces his readers not only to the twelfth century Aden and Mangalore but he also points out that Egypt and India unquestionably belong to a socio-cultural tradition based on the religion of hospitality. This remains a constantly operative factor in the novel, as it could be seen and felt during Ghosh's stay in Lataifa and Nashawy. It could also be seen during Ben Yiju's stay in Mangalore and Bomma's stay in Aden seven hundred years ago.

Incessantly the writer's Columbus-like spirit "ploughed" through the "footnotes of history" to retrace the story of the merchant and his slave. Ghosh's journey is not bed of roses, he carries out his research in the heat and dust of a Synagogue of Ben Ezra near Cairo: "It was here in the forlorn corner of Mass that memories of Abraham Ben Yiju and his slave lay preserved for more than seven hundred years." It is after the seven centuries the author records: "the sweat was dribbling off my face on to my notebooks. I gave up trying to work and sat in my room with the door open, hoping to trap a breath of fresh air."

Manuscripts he could lay his hands on were in Judaeo-Arabic and "that there was no accepted method of learning to read the manuscripts except through a long apprenticeship with one of the handful of scholars who had made a life-time's speciality of the subject."

In an Antique Land has episodic plot, yet it possesses organic unity because it has a beginning, a middle and an end. Events and span of history it covers are so arranged that the organic whole emerges. Ghosh's search in Lataifa and Nashawy is assisted by his neighbours there; Abu Ali, his "gargantuan landlord"; Khamees the Rat "the beady-eyed local wit"; his adversary the Imam; Zaghloul the weaver and "the quiet" Na-beel whose "personal fate-left stranded in Baghdad at the outset of the Gulf War-bespeaks a larger one for Egypt and the 'developing world."

Persistently, Ghosh's active and inquisitive mind searches for the relevance of Egypt-India relations over the period of time. Through one of the characters, Ustaz Sabry, a school teacher and scholar, the writer voices his own opinion:

> Our countries were very similar, for India, like Egypt, was largely an agricultural nation .... Our countries were poor, for they had both been ransacked by imperialists and now they were both trying in very similar ways to cope with poverty .... Our two countries had always supported each other in the past: Mahatma Gandhi had come to Egypt to consult Sa' ad Zaghloul Pasha, the leader of the Egyptian nationalist movement, and later Nehru and Nasser had forged a close alliance.

Ghosh is in Egypt in twentieth century as Ibn Battutat was in India in the thirteenth century. Like Battutat, Ghosh is nostalgic to retrace Ben Yiju's journey eastward which is "the simplest and most natural means of availing himself of the most rewarding possibilities his world had to offer." But unlike Battutat, Ghosh is writing a novel and not a historical treatise. His efforts are to provide "magical, intimate insights" not only into Egypt from the Crusades to Operation Desert Storm, but also into its cross-cultural relations with India.

During his adolescent years Abraham Ben Yiju could decide for him-self his vocation' to be the Business. Circumstances drew him near his patron Madmum (the Chief Representative of Merchants).

Ben Yiju introduced himself in Madmum's "privileged circle" and "curiously enough at some point before A.D. 1132 Ben Yiju moved to the Malabar coast and did not return to Aden for nearly two decades." He had three good reasons: first, his trade flourished and he felt no need to travel back to Aden; secondly his camaraderie with Bomma, his slave, who looked after his trade in the Middle East; and thirdly, what tempted Ben Yiju to stay in Mangalore was a Nair woman Ashu, whom he married and raised a family. Later, when he left Malabar coast, he took his children with him, leaving behind Ashu.

After revealing the story of Abraham Ben Yiju, Ghosh returns to Mangalore, meets Prof. Vivek Rai, a historian, who helps him to decipher the mystery surrounding the second protagonist of his story Bomma: Ghosh now links "the matrilineally descended Tulu and the patriarchal Jew who would otherwise seem to stand on different sides of an unbridgeable chasm." In order to break ennui Ghosh strives to create "fictive ties of kinship between people who were otherwise unrelated." He does not try to authenticate just the trade relations of the "antique lands" but also inaugurates the fact that in the medieval world, "slaves were sometimes gradually incorporated into their master's households and came to be counted as members of their families." Interestingly enough he records:

> Perhaps the most elusive aspect of medieval slavery is its role as spiritual metaphor, as an instrument of religious imagination .... Slavery was often used as an image to represent the devotee's quest for God .... Searching for their master with a passion that dissolved selfhood, wealth, caste and gender.

Besides Ben-Bomma story, Ghosh's stay in Egypt and orphic descriptions of contemporary Cairo form integrated part of the narrative. The writer's portrayal of Cairo enthrals the readers. If on one hand Ghosh's description has Wordsworthian sense of reality (to describe Nature) on the other it also has Coleridgean sense of wonder and awe. He intrusively comments here and there on superstitions of the people in Lataifa and Nashawy. At Nashawy, Amm Taha, like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner fascinates Ghosh because he gives details of "how matter stood behind the walls and talismans, they guarded every house from the envy of neighbours and the Evil Eye."

"Going Back" is the section which concentrates on the writer's second visit to Egypt. It registers socio-cultural change which has occurred in Egypt in recent years under the spell of the Western influence. People in village are no longer ignorant about the city glamour. Popular culture of the day has lured many young and old alike. It is no "surprise that Cairo absorbs outsiders." But "as a rule people here respect one another" and they are hospitable and "serene to foreigners." Thus in spite of the fact that like many other developing countries, Egypt too is attracted towards the Western commercial world, its natives have not yet developed xeroxed mentality of the West.

In an Antique Land does not display the author's intellectual capability or epic sweep. What one discovers is a very minute and shrewd observation of human nature. Therefore, he deals with a unit small enough to manage a microcosm, whether be it at Lataifa or Nashawy or Mangalore. The book has unadulterated, straight-forward impression of the people the writer came in contact with and the circumstances of the lives of the people during the course of his research. He paints the lively portraits of Abraham Ben Yiju and Bomma on one hand and on the other of Abu Ali, Ustaz Sabry, Sheikh Mussa, Nabeel and Zaghloul. All these characters burgeoned his wanderlust. Travel gave him a sense of freedom and leisure. Ghosh is thrilled to meet people and visit places. He could also get genuine picture of traditional Egypt by living among the villagers. He could get to know about their aspirations and setbacks, their sense of belongingness to their soil and also the young generation's uprootedness because of their search for new pastures green.

Ghosh sustains readers' interest by displaying rich and varied kinds of men and manners. The writer is absorbed by the variety of human types. It seems to him that in Egypt and India the most impressive and the most awe-inspiring monument of antiquity is neither the Citadels, nor the Pyramids, nor the Nile but the man himself. To see human beings closely is Ghosh's chief aim in visiting Egypt. With a convex lens in his hand he tries to penetrate into the people of contemporary world and also the people of antiquity. Their lives have dramatic situation and their dialogues have dramatic intensity. Each section of the book and each chapter add to the reader's clarity to understand the plot. *In an Antique Land* thus is a travel book for it records people and their manners. Ghosh has an artist's eye, his perceptions are sensitive and observations are acute. In the prologue he confesses that before getting the clues about the letters of Ben Yiju, he "had never heard of the Cairo Geniza... but within a few months, I was in Tunisia, learning arabic .... I knew nothing then about the slave of MS H. 6 except that he had given me a right to be there, a sense of entitlement." With this "sense of entitlement," Ghosh sets out to quench his quest for more interesting facts. He is "a travellers' tale." Apart from his perfectly pitched prose for vivid Images, Ghosh has the travel writer's infallible eye for the quirk that lays bare the soul of a people.

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In an Antique Land: A Counter-Narrative of Coloniality

Standing here, addressing a conference on "Commonwealth Studies" is a poignant reminder of the conquerors, the rulers, the imperialists who determined the history of the world and changed the events of our lives with a disjunctive violence. It is also a reminder of the fact that imperialism was more than economic exploitation and political domination. Coloniality and imperialism are relationships that have had a cultural, intellectual and social impact which is even more insidious than the naked fact of political domination. As the term postcolonial suggests, the fall-out of colonialism is still very much with us.

In Salman Rushdie's famous phrase, this present historical moment is when "the Empire writes back"; the periphery is speaking and the centre is listening. However, the intellectual power centre is still to shift. In Aijaz Ahmad's words, there is still only a limited range of "authorised questions" set by the intellectual centre that may be answered in the works of postcolonial literature and one of the central issues that may be addressed is that of the concept of "nationhood." As Ahmad comments, even to a sensitive and liberal critic like Frederic Jameson, "The essential task of a 'Third World' novel, it is said is to give appropriate form (preferably allegory, but epic also, or fairy tale, or whatever) to the national experience. The range of questions that may be asked of the texts . . . must predominate' refer, then, in one way or another, to representations of colonialism, nationhood, postcoloniality, the typology of rulers, their powers, corruptions an so forth."

It is in this context that Arnitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* deserves our attention. This novel focusses on the interrelationships of the people rather than of nation-states and their rulers. There are three important spatial tropes- India, Egypt and the 'West.' While India and Egypt have ancient ties which are myriad, the West is represented as the powerful interventionist in the relationship between the two. More importantly, the West, its rhetoric, its ideologies, its ways of thinking have been superimposed on the histories of the two 'antique lands.' Ghosh tries to show that the intervention of the West has destroyed the processes of dialogue, exchange, assimilation and syncreticism of the peoples of the two nations. Instead, there is the metaphysic of domination, classification and violence which Ghosh characterizes as 'Western.' He describes how in 1500 A.D. a Portuguese fleet came with a letter from the King of Portugal to the Hindu ruler of the city-state of Calicut demanding that he expel all Muslims.

As the Hindu ruler remained obstinate in his refusal to comply, the Portuguese fleet attacked and conquered what is today part of Gujarat. A hastily put together army of the Muslim potentate of Gujarat, the Hindu ruler of Calicut, and the Sultan of Egypt could offer little resistance. "As always, the determination of a small, united band of soldiers triumphed easily over the rich confusions that accompany a culture of accommodation and compromise." A modern parallel is established as Ghosh closes the novel. Almost five centuries later, the Gulf War again disrupts history and this time characters like Nabeel "vanish into the anonymity of History."

The construction of the text is itself complex. There are basically two strands of narrative. In the first, Ghosh looks at the life of a twelfth century Indian slave Bomma who works for an Arab Jewish trader Abraham Ben Yiju and tries to reconstruct his history, while the second portrays simultaneously his own experiences as an Indian researcher in an Egyptian village. Let us look at the strand of the narrative which deals with the ancient times first. Ghosh's choice of the Indian slave as the focal centre of the narrative is itself significant. He is literally a person who inhabits the footnotes of history. To quote the opening lines: "The slave of MS H. 6 first stepped upon the stage of modem history in 1942. His was a brief debut, in the obscurest of theatres, and he was scarcely out of the wings before he was gone again-more a prompter's whisper than a recognizable face in the cast."

From this anonymity, Ghosh attempts to rescue the life of this slave who was so much part of Ben Yiju's household that his friends would enquire after Bomma in their letters. In tracing this fascinating history, Ghosh makes us aware of how ancient the links are between what is today Egypt and what is today India. The cross-dissemination of cultures, religions, and traditions is brought to light through the existing correspondence of Ben Yiju with his family and friends, as well as by Ghosh's 'digressions' which describe the historical events of the past. All these coalesce marvellously to highlight the syncretism of culture. To take just two examples: first the passage which traces the history of the home of Abraham Ben Yiju, master of Bomma-a Roman fortress called Babylon. The fort was built in 130 A.D. by the emperor Trajan on the "site of an even earlier structure."

Of the two massive towers of the entrance to the fort, one has been incorporated several centuries ago into the structure of a Greek Orthodox Church. In Ben Yiju's time, it was a port which was busier than Baghdad and Basra combined. Through this gateway entered the Arab general in 641 which was the decisive event that marked the Muslim victory over the Christian powers in Masr or Egypt. He laid the foundations of a new city which soon replaced Alexandria as the country's capital. Three hundred years later, a general in the army of the Fatimid dynasty who was formerly a Greek slave, conquered the Egyptians and marked the boundaries of a new township, al-Qahira. "It was this name that was to pass into European languages as Cairo, Le Caire and the like." The passage recreates for us a time when these antique lands of the Middle East and the East were the centres of trade and commerce, of production and of culture. To quote:

> With the pivotal ascendancy of the Fatimid Empire, it (Al-Qahira) had come to play a pivotal role in the global economy as the entrepot that linked the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean: the merchandise that flowed through its bazaars came from as far afield as East Africa, Southern Europe, the Western Sahara, India, China and Indonesia ... the juncture of some of the most important trade routes in the known world and the nucleus of one of the richest and most cosmopolitan centres of the world.

Today this ruin is "a gigantic open refuse-pit, an immense rubbish dump" but "incredible as it may seem, excavations in this suppurating wasteland have yielded huge quantities of Chinese pottery and other riches: It was here that some of the earliest and most valuable fragments of Indian textiles have been found." This passage makes us aware of, among other things, the history, geography and economics of a world before colonialization, of the perpetual shifts in religious powers' of globalization of trade before GATT. This ancient centre is now a. "suppurating wasteland." Cairo (and Egypt) like all the countries or regions mentioned in this passage- East Africa, Southern Europe the Western Sahara, India and China are among the poorest, least productive countries m the postcolonial world. This passage also shows us the multiplicity of cultures that created the city. The Greeks, Muslims, Jews, the Orientals and the Christians all contributed in the building of Cairo and Cairo is, the author tells us, "Egypt's metaphor for itself".

The narrative which is interwoven with that of Ghosh's anthropological and archaeological researches is that of his experiences of the present. He goes to the villages of Lataifa and Nashawy to learn the language and culture of the Egyptians. Whereas the narrative mentioned earlier stresses the inter-relationships between countries and peoples this stand of the narrative seems to concentrate on the tendency towards exclusion. Some of the most humorous passages in the text are those when the fellahs (peasants) of Egypt react to Ghosh's account of India and Hinduism. These are a few of the exchanges: Ustaz Mustafa who has "read all about India when I was in college in Alexandria" says:

> "There is a lot of chili in the food and when a man dies his wife is dragged away and burnt alive."
>
> "Not always," I protested....
>
> "And of course you have Indira Gandhi and her son Sanjay Gandhi, who used to sterilise the Muslims.... "
>
> "No, no, he sterilized everyone," I said.
>
> His eyes widened and I added hastily: "No, not me, of course, but ..."
>
> "Yes," he said, nodding sagely. "I know."
>
> Later Ghosh admits that he is a Hindu, reluctantly because for him it is "a religious identity largely by default" to which Ustaz Mustafa says:
>
> "What is this 'Hinduki' thing? ... If it is not Christianity nor Judaeism nor Islam what can it be? Who are its prophets?"
>
> "It's not like that," I said. "There aren't any prophets..."
>
> "So you are like the Magi?" he said, bright-eyed. "You worship fire then?"
>
> I shook my head vaguely, but before I could answer ... he said smiling coquettishly, "I know-it's cows you worship-isn't that so?"

There was a sharp, collective intake of breath as Jabir and the other boys recoiled, calling upon God in whispers, to protect them from the Devil.

Scenes like these become distressingly familiar to the narrator in the text, but these exchanges serve to highlight two important aspects of modernist ideology-first, the ease with which the 'Other' is constructed and rejected as 'impure' or abnormal. Secondly, we the Indian readers, also receive a jolt along with the writer when we come face to face with the observer's vision of India and Hinduism. Even more poignant is the scene which finds Ghosh and the Imam "delegates from two superseded civilizations, vying with each other to establish a prior claim to the technology of modern violence."

> It seemed to me that the Imam and I had participated in our own final defeat, in the dissolution of the centuries of dialogue that had linked us: we had demonstrated the irreversible triumph of the language that had usurped all the others in which people once discussed their differences. We had acknowledged that it was no longer possible to speak, as Ben Yiju or his slave, or anyone of the thousands of travellers who had crossed the Indian Ocean in the Middle Ages might have done .... Instead ... we had both resorted ... to the very terms that world leaders and statesmen use at great, global conferences, the universal, irresistible metaphysic of modern meanings.

Ghosh is prodded *out* of his despair by the good-natured laughter of Eid and Khamees who tell him "Do not be upset, ya doktor. Forget about all those guns and things" and promises to visit him in India even to live with him. Thus, the possibility of dialogue in the language' of friendship and community is reestablished.

The West is also shown as the imperial power in the world of knowledge. Bomma's story ends in Philadelphia where the manuscripts are kept. The manuscripts are scattered far from their origins, in England, the United States and Russia. The history of these peoples has been appropriated, classified and housed in the 'West.' Facts are distorted "in the process of shaping them to suit the patterns of the Western academy." Yet the novel ends with the discovery that "in defiance of the enforcers of History, a small remnant of Bomma's world had survived" in the form of the tomb of Rabbi Abu-Hasira of Morocco.

This novel makes us rethink our notions of Time and Space as the title itself suggests. The choice of the word 'Land' rather than nation or even country undermines the modernist project of nationalism. While the word' Antique' is destabilized by the implied present of the phrase *In an Antique Land.* The title posits the text as one of "the counter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase the totalizing boundaries both actual and conceptual, disturb those ideological manoeuvre through which 'imagined communities' are given essentialist identities."

One way in which this is done in the text is to focus on the process of migrancy. While the 'migrant intellectual' has been valourized by writers like Bharati Mukherjee and Salman Rushdie, in this novel, Ghosh examines many other kinds of migrancy. Discussions of nationalism often ignore its 'Other' that is the creation of the exile, the migrant, the refugee. By accepting the nation as the 'given,' we overlook the fact that this is a relatively modem conceptual construct and that partitions and boundaries are, as Amitav Ghosh's earlier novel suggests "Shadow Lines."

The travels of Ben Yiju are motivated by economic concerns similar to those of the fellaheen who go to work in Iraq. Amitav Ghosh himself is on a search for knowledge while the German, British and American 'Orientalists' had already travelled these same roads. Edward Said points out that one way of challenging the very basics of every art and theory of government is to challenge the principle of confinement because "to be governed, people must be counted, taxed, educated, and of course ruled in regulated spaces." The nation-state cannot understand or accept those who do not fit into the neat categories it has created. Thus the police officer at the tomb of Sidi Abu-Hasira is confounded when he sees Ghosh's passport and finds he is not Israeli. Nor is he Jewish, Muslim or Christian-naturally he assumes that "There had to be something odd afoot." The senior officer is at pains to maintain his distance from Ghosh's companiofi Mohsin, by denying "the protective bonds of neighbourhood and kinship... the accustomed terms of communication, those immemorial courtesies of village life, by which people strove to discover mutual acquaintances and connections." It is, according to Said, these migrant workers, refugees, immigrants, students and other such groups who "constitute a real alternative to the authority of the state." The creation of the frameworks, the boundaries of nations, has also automatically created the margins, the outsiders. Ghosh seems in agreement with Frantz Failon's sentiment that "national consciousness, which is not nationalism is the only thing that will give us an international dimension."

Ghosh's tendency towards syncreticism and breaking barriers is reflected in the construct of the text itself. Breaking away from the traditions of both realism and magical realism, Ghosh's text is a combination of autobiography, history, anthropology, travelogue and fiction.

In this text, Ghosh seems to be responding to Said's call in *Culture and Imperialism:* 'The major task is to match the new economic and socio-political dislocations and congifurations of our time with the startling realities of human interdependence on a world scale. We need to go and to situate these in a geography of other identities, people, cultures, and then to study how, despite their differences, they have always overlapped one another, through unhierarchical influence crossing, incorporation, recollection, deliberate forgetfulness, and of course, conflict."

Ghosh seems to me to be one of the few novelists who is today offering an alternative to the postcolonial trend of narrating the nation. *In an Antique Land* presents us with a truly subversive look at history, while suggesting possibilities of an alternative discourse of dialogue, rather than domination.

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